

OPRE Report #2015-67

# **In Their Own Voices: The Hopes and Struggles of Responsible Fatherhood Program Participants in the Parents and Children Together Evaluation**

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Pamela Holcomb, Kathryn Edin, Jeffrey Max, Alford Young, Jr., Angela  
Valdovinos D'Angelo, Daniel Friend, Elizabeth Clary, Waldo E. Johnson, Jr.

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Aerospace 7th Floor West

901 D Street, SW

Washington, DC 20447

Seth Chamberlain (OPRE) – COR and Kathleen McCoy (OPRE/BSC) – Project  
Monitor

Contract Number: HHSP23320095642WC

Submitted by:

Mathematica Policy Research

1100 1st Street, NE

12th Floor

Washington, DC 20002-4221

Telephone: (202) 484-9220

Facsimile: (202) 863-1763

Project Director: M. Robin Dion

Reference Number: 06997.488



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## OVERVIEW

The Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is examining a set of Responsible Fatherhood (RF) and Healthy Marriage (HM) grantees funded by ACF's Office of Family Assistance (OFA). One part of the evaluation—the qualitative study—focuses on the views and experiences of fathers who voluntarily enroll and participate in RF programs.

This report describes themes and findings from the first round of in-depth interviews conducted as part of the qualitative study. Interviews were held with 87 low-income, mostly noncustodial fathers who voluntarily enrolled in one of the four RF programs being studied in PACT. This report draws extensively on quotes from fathers to paint a detailed portrait of their lives, including their own childhoods, views on fathering, relationships with their children and the mothers of their children, personal challenges, employment and child support experiences, and their participation in the fatherhood programs. Key themes and findings that emerged from fathers' narratives include:

- **The men often described childhoods marked by poverty and family instability, including absent fathers, exposure to substance abuse, conflict, and neglect.** Fathers shared that their early experiences often led to involvement in activities as youth and young men that resulted in arrests and incarceration. Early family instability also affected their views about what it meant to be a good father, leaving some feeling ill-equipped to fully become the parents they wanted to be for their children.
- **As fathers, these men desired to “be there” for their children and to help them avoid the same mistakes they had made.** Either at the time of birth or later in their children's lives, many realized that they had something else to live for—their children. Fatherhood was often credited for being a catalyst for making positive life changes, for themselves and for their children.
- **Fathers voluntarily enrolled in the RF programs primarily to become better fathers and to find steady employment.** Most fathers were appreciative of the programs, inspired by staff who were like themselves and had overcome similar challenges, and strengthened by the connections they made with other fathers in a safe and supportive setting. They described learning parenting skills, such as communication and discipline strategies with their children, and job readiness skills.
- **According to the fathers, the most common barrier to their involvement with their children was the ongoing contentious relationships with the mothers of their children.** A byproduct of these contentious relationships was gatekeeping by the children's mothers, which according to the fathers often limited access to their children and made it hard for them to be the kind of fathers they wanted to be.
- **As they sought to become more involved and supportive fathers, these men often faced formidable, interrelated life challenges.** These challenges included the effect of criminal records on their efforts to be stably employed; low wages; child support arrears that had built up during incarceration or unemployment; and difficulty obtaining housing that was both affordable and suitable for children.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sweeping changes have dramatically altered the structure of the American family—making marriage less common and fathers less present in their children’s lives. The proportion of married couples is lower than at any time in our nation’s history and the rate of childbearing outside of marriage continues to rise (Sawhill 2014). In 1960, one in 10 children in the United States lived in a home without their biological father whereas today, this is the case for more than one-quarter of children. Racial and ethnic differences in father absence are large, with substantially higher rates in African American and Hispanic households (U.S. Census Bureau 2015).<sup>1</sup>

Research on family policy suggests that fathers’ presence and involvement with their children have positive consequences for both children and fathers. Many low-income nonresident fathers long to be more involved in their children’s lives (Edin and Nelson 2013). However, some fathers struggle to maintain positive involvement with their children because of unemployment and difficulties providing financial support, the dissolution of their romantic relationships with the mothers of their children, incarceration, and unstable housing (Marsiglio et al. 2000; Tamis-LeMonda et al. 2004; Carlson 2006; Hofferth 2006; Cabrera et al. 2007).

Since 2005, Congress has funded the Responsible Fatherhood (RF) grant program, which promotes activities to increase fathers’ support of and positive involvement with their children. Hundreds of fatherhood programs are operating across the country, representing a wide range of philosophies, approaches, structures, and formats. Organizations receiving an RF grant must offer programming in three core areas: (1) parenting/fatherhood, (2) economic stability (such as employment services), and (3) healthy relationships and marriage.

This report provides a detailed portrait of fathers who enrolled in four fatherhood programs.

Despite the growing number of programs and increasing policy interest, the fatherhood field is still in its infancy and lacks a body of rigorous research evidence to guide it. To address this gap, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is sponsoring an evaluation to examine a set of RF grantees. The Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation will expand knowledge of what works in fatherhood programming and provide a detailed portrait of the fathers who enroll in RF programs.

The PACT evaluation is intended to provide a foundation and an initial building block in the evidence base to guide ongoing and future program design and evaluation. There are three main components to the PACT evaluation of RF programs: a randomized controlled trial that will measure the impact of the RF programs on child and father outcomes; a comprehensive process study that examines program design and operations (including a substudy of programs for Hispanic populations); and, a qualitative, longitudinal series of in-depth interviews with a subset of fathers participating in the

PACT RF programs to better understand their lives and experiences, including the complexities and difficulties they face as fathers.

The four programs in the PACT evaluation are:

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

The qualitative component of PACT, which is the focus of this report, builds on the current and growing body of research about economically disadvantaged fathers in three ways:

- First, the in-depth interviews for this study provide a comprehensive view of low-income fathers and the barriers that stand in the way of greater involvement with their children. In-depth interviews that encourage fathers to tell their stories provide richer and more nuanced information about them than can be drawn from structured surveys that ask fathers to select their responses from a set of pre-defined categories.
- Second, this study adds to the existing literature by collecting data on a relatively large sample and by focusing on a policy-relevant subset of low-income and largely nonresident fathers—those who choose to enroll in RF programs.
- Finally, our sample includes men with a variety of fatherhood experiences, such as new fathers and men with older children who stepped into the fathering role at a later point in their children's lives. The perspectives of these fathers can help policymakers seeking to understand what draws men to these programs, what challenges they face, and what they think about program services.

This qualitative study provides a rich narrative of the life experiences and circumstances of fathers who enroll in RF programs. Eighty-seven low-income fathers participated in in-depth, in-person interviews in October and November 2013. These interviews focused on fathers' childhoods, relationships with their children and the mothers of their children, views on fathering, employment experiences, and participation in the fatherhood programs. Researchers transcribed and coded the content of the interviews to create a database of fathers' experiences and views. To study changes over time, the same fathers will be asked to participate in subsequent interviews at approximately one-year intervals over a three-year period.



## Snapshot of fathers in the PACT qualitative study

The men interviewed for the qualitative study were predominantly low-income, African American fathers, with low levels of education, employment, and earnings, and past involvement in the criminal justice system.

- On average, the fathers were about 35 years old, ranging in age from 18 to 61 years old (the median age was 34 years old).
- About one in five fathers did not have a high school diploma or GED; the highest level of education for almost two-thirds of fathers was a high school diploma or GED.
- Almost half of the fathers had not worked for pay in the past month (52 percent had a regular paid job, odd job, temporary job, or informal work in the past month) and 38 percent had not worked in the past 6 months.
- Almost all of the fathers had some involvement with the criminal justice system—95 percent had been arrested, and three in four fathers had been convicted of a crime.
- Most of the men were nonresident fathers. About three in four fathers currently were not living with any of their biological children (78 percent), and another 12 percent of fathers were living with some but not all of their children.
- Despite their nonresident status, two-thirds of the fathers had fairly regular contact with one or more of their children. At the same time, about half of fathers had less frequent contact with at least one child.

## Key themes and findings

- **“It’s all about the kids” – Fathers’ narratives underscore the fact that low-income fathers often enroll in RF programs because they long to be more engaged in their children’s lives.** These fathers viewed “being there” as a core part of responsible fatherhood and sought to give their children a better life than they had. The motivation to be an active force in their children’s lives sometimes stemmed from their desire to compensate for the absence of their own fathers, or for the neglectful, traumatic, and sometimes abusive early experiences they had suffered themselves.
- **“It was rough” – Fathers described childhoods affected by poverty and family instability.** There is one common factor across the majority of men that made it difficult for them to fully become the parents they wanted to be for their children: their own troubled childhoods and lack of positive family role models. Many of the men we interviewed had fathers who were absent or minimally involved in their lives, and some of the men described early exposure to substance abuse and violence. The mothers of the men were often a more consistent presence in their lives, but some of these mothers struggled with personal challenges that affected their ability

to parent. The men we interviewed had mixed experiences with their mothers' new partners or husbands—some served as father figures while others were physically or emotionally abusive. Fathers sometimes described how extended family stepped in to provide financial or emotional support. While the majority of men had difficult family lives as children, almost a third of the men described having good relationships with their fathers and positive recollections of their childhoods, with few to none of these challenges.

- **“I’m not going to be no help to my kids in prison or dead” – Fatherhood could and did transform many men’s outlook on life and provided a catalyst for making positive changes in their lives.** The family instability that many men experienced in childhood led some to join gangs and sell drugs as youth, and the large majority of fathers had a history of incarceration. But at some point after these men became fathers—either when their children were born or later in their children’s lives—they realized they were no longer just living for themselves. As a result, fathers felt the need to “slow down” and leave behind the negative influences of their past to fully embrace their role as fathers. Fathers’ narratives also make clear that fatherhood is an evolving process. Many who say they failed to engage in the father role when their children were younger, or became disengaged over time, came to the RF program out of a new or renewed desire to claim the fatherhood role.
- **“She makes it really hard to be a dad” – The most common barrier fathers cited for their continued involvement with their children was their ongoing contentious relationships with the mothers of their children.** Conflict and instability pervaded men’s relationships with their children’s mothers, often from the beginning. Highly volatile relationships, and often highly conflictual breakups, cast a long shadow, constraining the parents’ ability to cooperate in ways that allowed the father to play a parenting role. A byproduct of these contentious relationships was gatekeeping by the children’s mothers, which limited fathers’ access to their children.
- **“I don’t see my baby because really, her mom and I have issues” – While some fathers had positive co-parenting relationships with the mothers of their children, most did not.** Fathers described mothers who restricted physical access to their children, who left entirely without providing contact information, or who were erratic in their willingness to let fathers see their children. Mothers acted as gatekeepers in more indirect ways too—refusing to communicate with fathers or to share important information about the child.
- **“Life’s hard” – Fathers faced formidable, interrelated life challenges that also hindered greater involvement with their children.** Fathers in the study were attempting to set their lives on a more stable path and fulfill their roles as fathers more effectively amidst severe and deeply interrelated life challenges. Past and ongoing interactions with the criminal justice system intersected with many of these challenges. Spells of incarceration often limited fathers’ physical access at

critical points in their children’s early life course, and past felonies sharply limited men’s employment opportunities and their ability to secure housing. Most fathers struggled to maintain employment. Even working fathers had difficulty making ends meet because they could find only low-wage jobs, were often given only limited hours, or managed to land only temporary work. To add to these challenges, over half of these fathers were unstably housed, and child support obligations often created additional financial burden. The fathers commonly volunteered information about past alcohol and substance abuse issues, and some were still early in their recovery process. The combined stress of these factors limited men’s ability to remain employed, remain housed, and maintain contact with their children.

- **“I’m a better father [and] I’m taking the steps that I need” – Fathers’ desire to become better fathers and to secure a job motivated them to enroll in the RF programs, and they valued the services they received.** Fathers responded positively to RF programs because they wanted to be more involved in their children’s lives and had reached a point where becoming a father, or choosing to reengage in the father role, had motivated or strengthened their resolve to change. Many fathers came to a deeper understanding of the importance of their involvement with their children, and they described learning practical parenting skills, such as how to communicate more effectively with their children. On the employment front, fathers received help developing resumes, completing applications, and preparing for interviews; they also obtained information about job openings.
- **“Some down-to-earth brothers that I respected.” – The ability of RF programs to connect fathers to “men like me” is part of what makes these programs relevant and valuable to the fathers.** Men’s narratives indicate that they highly valued connecting with other fathers who, like themselves, were seeking to make positive changes, and with staff who had made those changes. This aspect makes the programs “genuine” for participants and encourages and reinforces their motivation to change.

### **Implications for Responsible Fatherhood policy and program design**

- **Improving fathers’ access to their children.** Although fathers said that they valued and learned a great deal from the programs’ parenting component, the fact that so many had little to no contact with at least one of their children limited the extent to which these parenting skills could be put into practice. About a quarter of RF participants said they received information about parenting time or custody issues, but most fathers did not live with their children and desired greater access and more involvement with them. RF programs could play a more proactive role in helping fathers obtain court-ordered parenting time agreements, including forging stronger partnerships with the courts to facilitate this process. Because many fathers wanted or appeared to need more individualized legal assistance to successfully negotiate custody and parenting time issues, a useful step would be to devote more programmatic

resources to providing access to pro bono or other low-cost attorneys and related legal services to help fathers obtain parenting time agreements. These two efforts could be useful in laying the legal groundwork for fathers' access to their children. A parenting time agreement may not always be appropriate, however, so steps to safeguard against domestic violence and child maltreatment must continue to be included as a critical element of any strategy designed to increase parenting time for fathers.

- **Offering stronger and more comprehensive co-parenting and relationship skills services.** Many men reported conflict-ridden relationships with their children's mothers. This conflict often directly interfered with their ability to have contact with their children, and triggered deep anger and frustration. The problems fathers face maintaining access to their children because of mothers' gatekeeping behaviors suggests that more attention needs to be paid to co-parenting and addressing challenges faced by parents in high-conflict relationships. The prevalence of fathers' volatile relationships with the mothers of their children suggests the need for co-parenting services to emphasize strategies for anger management, positive communication skills, and conflict resolution. In addition, co-parenting services should include access to mediation and counseling services in order to reduce relationship conflict and increase father involvement. Programmatic efforts to provide relationship skill building services to fathers' current partners should continue to be encouraged, as these relationships often produce children, yet are highly likely to dissolve, and the tensions in these more recent relationships can also rebound with negative consequences for a man's relationship to a child from an earlier union.
- **Augmenting existing employment services.** While fathers generally provided positive feedback about the job readiness and job search skills they obtained through the RF programs, the employment challenges these men typically face are significant. Most were still struggling to find steady employment, earn enough to make ends meet, and meet their child support obligations. Although these fathers faced a myriad of barriers to gaining and maintaining employment, the most commonly cited obstacle was fathers' past incarceration and criminal records. These findings suggest that the economic stability component of RF programs may need to be strengthened to improve the chances that fathers will be successful at securing good jobs with steady and adequate wages. Any employment approach should include assistance in expunging or sealing criminal records when possible.
- **Increasing RF program collaboration with the child support and court systems.** Child support orders generally exceeded fathers' ability to pay, and most of the fathers with child support orders said they had accumulated child support arrears, sometimes in large amounts. Despite the financial burden that child support placed on these low-income fathers, only a few fathers indicated that they received child support assistance from the RF programs that led to a downward modification of their child support order or a reduction in their arrears. Fathers in these programs could benefit from more intensive

one-on-one efforts to navigate both the child support and the court systems. Providing additional on-site child support and legal assistance could help ensure that more fathers with child support orders have their cases reviewed and that the necessary steps are taken to adjust their orders, reduce arrears whenever possible and appropriate, and reduce the likelihood that fathers are jailed for nonpayment of child support.

- **Expanding and intensifying supplementary services.** The range and severity of challenges faced by these fathers are such that additional services may be needed in conjunction with the three core RF components and child support service needs noted above. For example, many fathers struggled to find a stable and secure place to live, and often ended up living with family and friends, in a shelter, or on the streets. Arrests for minor offenses could wreak havoc in fathers' lives, and create a cycle of negative effects, including job loss, additional debt, and increased economic insecurity. In addition, one out of three fathers described experiencing emotional and mental health issues. Some of these services are needed but may not be fundable under current responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage legislation. These additional services include:
  - » Finding stable and affordable housing opportunities, particularly to facilitate visitation
  - » Obtaining legal assistance for issues beyond child support, such as probation or parole requirements, outstanding warrants, court fees, fines, tickets, and suspended drivers' licenses
  - » Gaining access to mental health services

In sum, RF programs speak to men's desires to transform their lives and become more engaged fathers. RF programs provide a valuable resource for low-income fathers at different points in the life course, starting with young men expecting their first child. They can address the needs of young fathers in the early stages of forming first-time families, older fathers with multiple children, and fathers who are newly reentering society after a period of incarceration. For men who want to turn their life around and be the kind of father they never had, programs such as the four included in this study can offer men supports and skills to improve their chances at what they want most—to ensure their children do not make the same mistakes they did, and to give their children and themselves a brighter future.

## I. INTRODUCTION



Sweeping changes have dramatically altered the structure of the American family—making marriage less common, and fathers less present in their children’s lives. The proportion of married couples is lower than at any time in our nation’s history and the rate of childbearing outside of marriage continues to rise (Sawhill 2014). In 1960, one in 10 children in the United States lived in a home without their biological father whereas today, this is the case for more than one-quarter of children. Racial and ethnic differences in father absence are large, with substantially higher rates in African American and Hispanic households (U.S. Census Bureau 2015).<sup>1</sup>

Many nonresident fathers are unmarried, low-income men, estranged from their children’s mothers within a few years of their child’s birth (Carlson and McLanahan 2010). Nonresident fathers tend to be more economically vulnerable than other men—they are less likely to have education beyond a high school degree, and more likely to be African American or Hispanic, unemployed, and earning less than \$40,000 annually (Mincy et al. 2015). The economic situation for many of these lower-income nonresident fathers is made even more precarious by child support obligations or responsibilities for other children with whom they live (Mincy et al. 2015). Some fathers struggle to maintain positive involvement with their children as a result of unemployment and difficulties providing financial support, the dissolution of their romantic relationships with the mothers of their children, incarceration, and unstable housing (Marsiglio et al. 2000; Tamis-LeMonda et al. 2004; Carlson 2006; Hofferth 2006; Cabrera et al. 2007).

Research on family policy suggests that fathers’ presence and involvement with their children can have positive consequences for both children and fathers (Marsiglio et al. 2000; Tamis-LeMonda et al. 2004; Carlson 2006; Hofferth 2006; Cabrera et al. 2007). The involvement and support of fathers can affect lifelong outcomes for children such as educational attainment, employment, and childbearing (Wu & Martinson 1993;

McLanahan & Sandefur 1994; Wolfinger 2003). The quality of interactions between fathers and their children is particularly important for child well-being (Marsiglio et al. 2000; Stewart 2003), and involvement in certain child-related activities is associated with positive social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment in children (Adamsons and Johnson 2013).

Many low-income nonresident fathers long to be more involved in their children's lives (Edin and Nelson 2013). If these fathers can develop relevant parenting and job-related skills and capacities, they can contribute financially and become positive influences on their children's well-being (Black et al. 1999; Howard et al. 2006). Efforts have expanded to help low-income fathers reconnect with their children and support them emotionally and financially. Since 2005, Congress has funded the Responsible Fatherhood (RF) grant program, which promotes activities to increase fathers' support of and positive involvement with their children.<sup>2</sup> Hundreds of fatherhood programs are operating across the country, representing a wide range of philosophies, approaches, structures, and formats. Organizations receiving an RF grant must offer programming in three core areas: (1) parenting/fatherhood, (2) economic stability (such as employment services), and (3) healthy relationships and marriage.

Despite the growing number of programs and increasing policy interest, the fatherhood field is still in its infancy and lacks a body of rigorous research evidence to guide it. To address this gap, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is sponsoring an evaluation to examine a set of RF and HM grantees. The Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation will expand knowledge of what works in fatherhood and healthy marriage programming and provide a detailed portrait of the fathers who enroll in RF programs.

There are three main components to the PACT evaluation of RF programs: a randomized controlled trial that will measure the impact of the RF programs on child and father outcomes; a comprehensive process study that examines program design and operations (including a substudy of programs for Hispanic populations); and a longitudinal, qualitative study of the fathers who participate in four of the RF programs (see box on page 4 for an overview and additional detail on the PACT evaluation). The four programs in the PACT evaluation are:

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

This report provides a detailed portrait of fathers who enrolled in four fatherhood programs.

This report draws on the first of a longitudinal series of in-depth interviews with a subset of fathers participating in the PACT RF programs to better understand their lives and experiences, including the complexities and difficulties they face as fathers. To study changes over time, the same fathers will be asked to participate in subsequent interviews at approximately one-year intervals over a three-year period. For the first round, 87 low-income, urban, predominantly minority fathers participated in two-hour in-depth interviews in October and November 2013. The interviews focused on fathers' childhoods, relationships with their children and the mothers of their children, views on fathering, employment and child support experiences, and participation in the fatherhood programs.

Although research about disadvantaged fathers has grown over the past decade, this report builds on current evidence in three ways. First, it provides a detailed examination of the lives and perspectives of low-income fathers. The in-depth interviews for this study provide a comprehensive view of low-income fathers and the barriers that stand in the way of greater involvement with their children. In-depth interviews that encourage fathers to tell their stories provide richer and more nuanced information about them than can be drawn from structured surveys that ask fathers to select their responses from a set of pre-defined categories.





## Overview of the PACT evaluation

The Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation examines the effectiveness of a subset of Responsible Fatherhood (RF) and Healthy Marriage (HM) programs. The evaluation is intended to provide a foundation and an initial building block in the evidence base to guide ongoing and future program design and evaluation. PACT's goals include measuring the impact of RF and HM programs on fathers' involvement, economic stability, and partner relationships; documenting the services received by participants in these programs; describing how the RF and HM programs deliver services; and understanding the experiences and needs of fathers who participate in RF programs. To achieve these goals, the PACT evaluation addresses research questions from several angles, using a mixed-method approach to tell a more complete story about these RF programs and the fathers they serve:

**IMPACT STUDY.** The impact study is a randomized controlled trial that is developing rigorous evidence on the causal effects of the RF and HM programs on key outcomes, including fathers' engagement with their children, employment and economic self-sufficiency, family functioning, and co-parenting and romantic relationships. Eligible program applicants were randomly assigned to either a program group that participates in the RF or HM program or a control group that does not (but can access services available in the community). Telephone surveys of all study participants—in both the program and control groups—are conducted at baseline, when fathers first enroll, and at follow-up, about 12 months after random assignment.

**PROCESS STUDY.** The process study documents how the RF and HM programs are implemented and identifies both the challenges and promising practices of program implementation. Data for the implementation study were collected through semi-structured interviews with program staff and focus groups with participants during two site visits to grantees. The process study also included telephone interviews with program dropouts, a web-based survey of program staff, and data from a study management information system. A substudy of four additional RF grantees that serve predominantly Hispanic fathers explores how Hispanic-focused RF programs are designed and operated. Data for the substudy were collected via semi-structured interviews with program staff, as well as through focus groups and questionnaires with participants.

**QUALITATIVE STUDY.** The qualitative study focuses on participants in the RF programs, utilizing ethnographic techniques to shed light on their lives, including how they discussed their roles as parents, partners, and providers, and the factors that may affect their ability to benefit from the RF programs. The primary method for collecting data on fathers is three rounds of in-depth, in-person interviews conducted annually, supplemented by brief telephone check-in calls between in-person interviews.

The perspectives of these fathers can help policymakers better understand what draws men to these programs, what challenges they face, and what they think about program services.

Second, although researchers have used in-depth interviews to explore the perspective of low-income fathers (Johnson et al. 1999; Becerra et al. 2001; Roy 2004; Young and Holcomb 2007; Ulrich 2009; Roy and Dyson 2010; Edin and Nelson 2013; Mincy et al. 2015), this study adds to that research by collecting data on a relatively large sample: 87 fathers in three metropolitan areas, to be followed over a three-year period. This study is focused on a policy-relevant subset of low-income and largely nonresident fathers—those who choose to enroll in RF programs. Learning about the perspectives of these fathers can help policymakers better understand what draws men to these programs, what challenges they face, and what they think about program services.

Finally, this study focuses on fathers who entered RF programs at different life stages. As a result, our sample includes men with a diverse set of fatherhood experiences, such as new fathers and men with older children who stepped into the fathering role at a later point in their children's lives.

### **A. PACT qualitative study goals and features**

The mix of younger and older fathers in the study can help clarify fathers' diverse life circumstances and how RF programs can reach fathers at different stages in their lives.

The PACT qualitative study addresses three main goals:

- Explore the lives of the men that RF programs serve, including their perceptions of their own life histories and current circumstances.
- Examine who these men believe themselves to be as fathers, and their attitudes, behaviors, and past and current experiences with regard to fatherhood.
- Understand what motivated men to participate and continue participating in RF programs, and how RF programs fit within the broader context of fathers' experiences.

The in-depth qualitative study that is the focus of this report provides a rich narrative of the life experiences and circumstances of fathers who enroll in RF programs. Drawing on information from in-depth interviews, conveyed in the men's own words, this component of the PACT evaluation will inform RF policy and practice by describing fathers' perspectives on their lives, their children, and their involvement in the RF programs. These interviews generated over 4,200 pages of transcript illuminating the lives of the respondents.

In this report, men are referred to only by pseudonyms to protect the identity of fathers. Other people that fathers referred to during their interview, such as the fathers' children or former romantic partners, are also referred to by pseudonyms. Each father was given a different pseudonym that is used consistently throughout the report. In addition, due to confidentiality concerns, none of the fathers or children in the pictures throughout the report are in the study.

## B. How fathers were selected for the qualitative study

The approach to selecting fathers for the study generated a varied sample of fathers who engaged in the RF programs (see Appendix A for more detail on sample selection). Fathers were eligible for the qualitative study if they were randomly assigned to the evaluation program group and participated to a “moderate” or “high” degree in the RF programs between the months of December 2012 and October 2013.<sup>3</sup> The selection strategy excluded fathers who enrolled in one of the four RF programs but never participated or participated only once in any program workshop (i.e., on parenting, relationships, or employment).<sup>4</sup> Limiting our sample to fathers with at least some degree of program engagement ensured that we would gain insights not only into what motivated them to enroll but also into how their experiences in the program fit into the broader context of their lives.

First, we identified 611 fathers who participated in two or more workshops (our sampling frame). Then, within each site we ranked them based on the total number of workshops in any program component (i.e., parenting, relationship, or employment workshops) they participated. A “high degree” of participation was defined as being at or above the 75th percentile of participation in each site. A “moderate degree” of participation was defined as being below the 75th percentile of participation in each site.<sup>5</sup>

Our overall goal was to interview at least 72 fathers. We over-recruited because we were unsure how many fathers would show up for their scheduled interviews. We scheduled a total of 123 interviews and completed 93, for a 74 percent response rate (Table I.1). Fathers in the sampling frame were randomly ordered within each participation group and recruited in that order until slots were filled. The number of fathers interviewed in each RF program site ranged from 20 to 26, with a response rate of at least 70 percent in each site. We ultimately dropped six of the completed interviews from the sample due to audio difficulties (e.g. a recorder malfunctioned and made portions of the recording inaudible) or other circumstances that compromised the quality of interviews (e.g., a father who brought his children to the interview).

**Table I.1. PACT fathers interviewed by RF program site**

	Scheduled	No-show	Complete
Goodwill-Easter Seals	34	8	26
Urban Ventures	25	5	20
Connections to Success	29	7	22
Fathers' Support Center	35	10	25
All sites	123	30	93

Note: Final N = 87 due to 6 interviews that were dropped from the sample. See Appendix A for more details.

The fathers interviewed for the qualitative study were similar to the full sample of fathers who were eligible for the qualitative study and to the overall sample of fathers participating in the PACT evaluation, with no significant differences on any key characteristics, such as age, race/ethnicity, education, employment, or number of children (see Appendix A).

### **C. Research methods**

The PACT qualitative study is grounded in a rigorous approach to qualitative research (see Appendix B for more detail on our study methods). We determined the sample of men, and drawing on previous qualitative work conducted with low-income fathers (Edin, Nelson, and Paranal 2001; Young 2006; Marsiglio and Roy 2012; Edin and Nelson 2013; Edin et al. 2015), we developed an interview protocol (see Appendix C).

The interview protocol addressed topics related to the three study goals described above:

- RF program experiences
- family of origin and relationships with mother and father
- composition of current family structure
- involvement and relationship with child(ren)
- relationship with mother(s) of child(ren)
- child support system experiences
- employment
- life challenges
- aspirations

Interviews were conducted in-person and on average lasted two hours. One-on-one interviews with the fathers were conducted by experienced senior staff who had undergone rigorous training on the protocol and interviewing techniques. The interviews were held in public locations such as hotels, libraries, health centers, or community centers accessible by public transportation. While the locations were public, the interviews took place in private conference rooms (within hotels and community centers) or separate study rooms (within libraries). The study team did not conduct interviews in fathers' current residences out of safety and privacy concerns—many fathers were living in high-crime neighborhoods unfamiliar to the interviewers; and the interviews, many of which occurred at night, were conducted one-on-one. At the conclusion of each interview, fathers received a \$60 Visa gift card as an incentive to participate in the interview and a token of appreciation for their time.

After transcribing the interviews, we coded them using deductive codes derived from the research questions and interview protocol as well as inductive codes derived from the text during the coding process. The coding team used these codes to generate reports for each thematic area, document emergent subthemes, and identify supporting quotations in a memo. A database was used to pull together information about fathers across multiple areas, to allow us to analyze the relationship between different aspects of fathers' lives or across different themes. This report is structured around the broad thematic areas that were analyzed, with each chapter covering the findings from one or more of these areas.

The in-depth interview approach complements the closed-ended questions in the baseline survey for the PACT impact study. For example, whereas the baseline survey collects information about fathers' current housing situation, the in-depth interviews provide more nuanced information about why fathers may be experiencing housing instability, how they have tried to address the problem, and how the problem might affect other areas of their lives, such as employment, relationships, and involvement with their children.

The three-wave design of the qualitative study permits us to cover more topics than could be addressed in a single interview, and to reveal how the views, attitudes, opinions, and reported activities of these fathers may shift over a period of three years. The follow-up interviews each year will provide the opportunity to both explore new topics and revisit topics already discussed during previous interviews. This will yield a more complete picture of potential instability and transitions associated with fathers' changing circumstances. By following the same fathers over time, we can better understand the implications of these changes for involvement with their children, work, relationships, and the fatherhood program. Key themes and findings presented in this report are based on the first wave of interviews. This report's findings will be subject to further analysis and interpretation in light of what is learned from these fathers in subsequent interview waves.

This study is descriptive and cannot make causal statements. While the analysis provides a rich, detailed look at the dynamic lives of fathers enrolled in RF programs, it cannot delineate the causal processes or directionality of relationships described in this report. In addition, fathers in the qualitative study—and the PACT evaluation more broadly—may not be representative of the broader population of low-income fathers. The PACT evaluation includes fathers who voluntarily enrolled in one of the four RF programs, and the qualitative study focuses on fathers who participated in the programs to some degree. The data do not represent fathers who had lower levels of participation or who never participated in the programs and thus were not selected to be interviewed. In addition, the fathers are predominantly African American and their narratives may not reflect experiences and perceptions of those with a different cultural background. Similarly, all of the fathers in the PACT evaluation live in urban areas in the Midwest, so their experiences may not reflect fathers who live in rural areas or other settings.

The information presented in this report is solely based on fathers' narratives and their interpretation of events, relationships, and circumstances.

Finally, information presented in this report is solely based on fathers' narratives and their interpretation of events, relationships, and circumstances. Their views do not necessarily encompass the views and perceptions of their children, the mothers of their children, or others included in their narrative. Also, many of the questions that interviewers ask the fathers are answered naturally during the course of the interview. Thus, although each interview covered all the topics in the protocol, not every specific question was asked of every father, so certain themes or answers to specific questions cannot be reported on every father in the sample.

These limitations notwithstanding, the insights gained from this effort can help inform fatherhood policy development and the design of fatherhood programs, aid in the generation of hypotheses to help guide future research, and help create a more nuanced portrait of the lives of economically disadvantaged fathers.

#### **D. Roadmap to the report**

The remainder of this report presents key themes and findings from the qualitative interviews conducted with 87 fathers.

- Chapter II describes characteristics of the fathers included in this study and their involvement with their children.
- Chapter III outlines the meaning of fatherhood for the men enrolled in the RF programs, including how fatherhood is a potentially transformative experience in these men's lives, and what these fathers valued most about being a father.
- Chapter IV takes a step back to understand the tumultuous childhoods and early family experiences that influenced fathers' views on fatherhood and their desire to be an active presence in their children's lives.
- Chapter V explains a key barrier for fathers' efforts to become more involved with their children—fathers' often contentious relationships with the mothers of their children and the role some mothers play in limiting fathers' efforts to be involved in their children's lives.
- Chapter VI describes the life challenges that create additional barriers to men's ability to fulfill their role as fathers.
- Chapter VII describes the role of the RF programs in helping fathers to address these barriers and improve their relationships with their children.
- Chapter VIII summarizes the major findings from the study and presents implications for policies and programs aimed at serving this population.

## II. OVERVIEW OF FATHERS IN THE PACT QUALITATIVE STUDY



The Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs in the PACT evaluation primarily serve low-income, nonresident fathers who face multiple challenges (Zaveri et al. 2015). To better understand the men interviewed for the qualitative study and the context in which they pursued their roles as fathers, this chapter describes their socioeconomic characteristics, family structures, and involvement with their children. This information, primarily based on the baseline survey conducted when fathers first enrolled in the RF programs, is background for the more in-depth characterization of fathers' lives in subsequent chapters.

### A. Characteristics of fathers in the qualitative study

The men interviewed for the qualitative study were predominantly low-income fathers, with low levels of education, employment, and earnings, and past involvement in the criminal justice system (Table II.1). Most of the fathers were African American (84 percent), and about 35 years old, on average, ranging in age from 18 to 61 years old.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Tough circumstances: unstable jobs, child support, time in jail, tenuous housing**

Fathers in the qualitative study commonly struggled with employment. Almost half of the fathers had not worked for pay in the past month (52 percent had a regular paid job, odd job, temporary job, or informal work in the past month) and 38 percent had not worked in the past 6 months. Most of those who worked had low-wage jobs—almost half of working fathers reported earning less than \$500 in the past month.



**Table II.1. Characteristics of fathers in the qualitative study**

	Mean or Percent
<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>	
Average age (years)	35
Black (non-Hispanic) (%)	84
White (non-Hispanic) (%)	9
Hispanic (%)	3
Other race (%) <sup>a</sup>	3
<b>Socioeconomic Status (%)</b>	
Highest level of education	
High school diploma	43
GED	20
Any postsecondary	15
Recent paid work (in past month)	52
<b>Earnings in Last 30 Days (%)</b>	
No earnings	48
\$1–\$500	24
\$501–\$1,000	13
More than \$1,001	15
<b>Housing Stability (%)</b>	
Stable housing	
Own home	5
Rent home	25
Contribute to rent	15
Unstable housing	
Live rent-free	33
Live in half-way or group house, treatment facility	9
Homeless (e.g., in shelter, on the streets, in an abandoned building/car)	8
Live in other unstable housing	5
<b>Criminal History</b>	
Ever arrested (%)	95
Ever convicted of a crime (%)	78
Currently on parole (%)	31
Longest time in adult correctional institution (years)	1.8



	<b>Mean or Percent</b>
<b>Child Support</b>	
Have legal child support arrangement (%)	58
Average amount paid in last 30 days <sup>b</sup>	\$169
<b>Psychological Well-Being</b>	
At risk for moderate to severe depression (%) <sup>c</sup>	28
<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>87</b>

Source: PACT baseline survey.

Note: The percentage of fathers by race does not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

<sup>a</sup> The category for "other race" includes fathers who are multi-race and Native American.

<sup>b</sup> This average includes fathers who reported paying \$0 in child support in the last month.

<sup>c</sup> As measured by the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8; Kroenke et al. 2009). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) uses the PHQ-8 to assess the prevalence of depressive symptoms among individuals who live above and below the poverty level (Pratt and Brody 2014).

Without a steady source of adequate income, fathers with child support orders (58 percent) often struggled. Among fathers with a child support order, 42 percent reported in the baseline survey paying an average of \$387 in the month prior to enrollment, with amounts ranging from \$10 to \$1,600. Another 54 percent of fathers with a child support order did not pay any child support; most of these (69 percent of those who paid no child support in the last month) also reported that they had no earnings in the prior month.<sup>7</sup>

Involvement in the criminal justice system was the norm for fathers in the qualitative study. Almost all of the fathers had some involvement with the criminal justice system—95 percent had been arrested, and three in four fathers had been convicted of a crime. The average time fathers had served in a correctional institution was 1.8 years, and 31 percent of fathers were currently on parole.

Fathers in the qualitative study also had low educational attainment and unstable housing. About one in five fathers did not have a high school diploma or GED, and the highest level of education for almost two-thirds of fathers was a high school diploma or GED. According to the baseline survey, about half of the fathers in the qualitative study had a relatively unstable housing situation. About one-third of fathers lived rent-free with someone else who provided them housing. A small portion of fathers (9 percent) lived in a halfway house, treatment center, or transitional housing, and 8 percent lived in a shelter or on the streets. Another 5 percent of fathers had some other type of unstable housing situation.

About three in four fathers currently were not living with any of their biological children.

### **Nonresident fathers, but regular contact with at least some of their children**

Most men in the qualitative study were nonresident fathers (Table II.2). About three in four fathers currently were not living with any of their biological children (78 percent), and another 12 percent of fathers were living with some but not all of their children (not shown). However, the large majority of fathers had lived with a child at some point (87 percent).

**Table II.2. Fathers' children and the mothers of their children**

	Mean or Percent
Number of children (mean)	2.4
Have children with multiple mothers (%)	46
Live currently with at least one biological child (%)	22
Ever lived with any biological child (%)	87
Amount of contact in last month (with at least one biological child) <sup>a</sup> (%)	
More frequent contact (ranging from every day to a few times a month)	66
Less frequent contact (ranging from once or twice a month to not at all)	51
No contact	38
In romantic relationship with mother of at least one child (%)	27
In romantic relationship with nonparental partner (%)	21
<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>87</b>

Source: PACT baseline survey.

<sup>a</sup>These rows sum up to more than 100 percent because the same father can have more frequent contact with one child and less frequent contact with another child.

Despite their nonresident status, almost two-thirds of fathers had fairly regular contact with one or more of their children.

Despite their nonresident status, almost two-thirds of fathers had fairly regular contact with one or more of their children. At the same time, about half of fathers had less frequent contact with at least one child. Taken together, this suggests that most fathers had varying levels of contact with different children. In addition, just over 10 percent of fathers had no contact with any of their children in the past month.

Fathers were fairly evenly split between those who had children with one partner, and those who had children with multiple partners. Just under half of the fathers (46 percent) had children with multiple women. Most fathers were currently not in a relationship with any mother of their children or in a relationship with another partner. About one in four fathers was in a romantic relationship with the mother of his child, and another 21 percent of fathers currently had a romantic relationship with a partner with whom they did not have children.

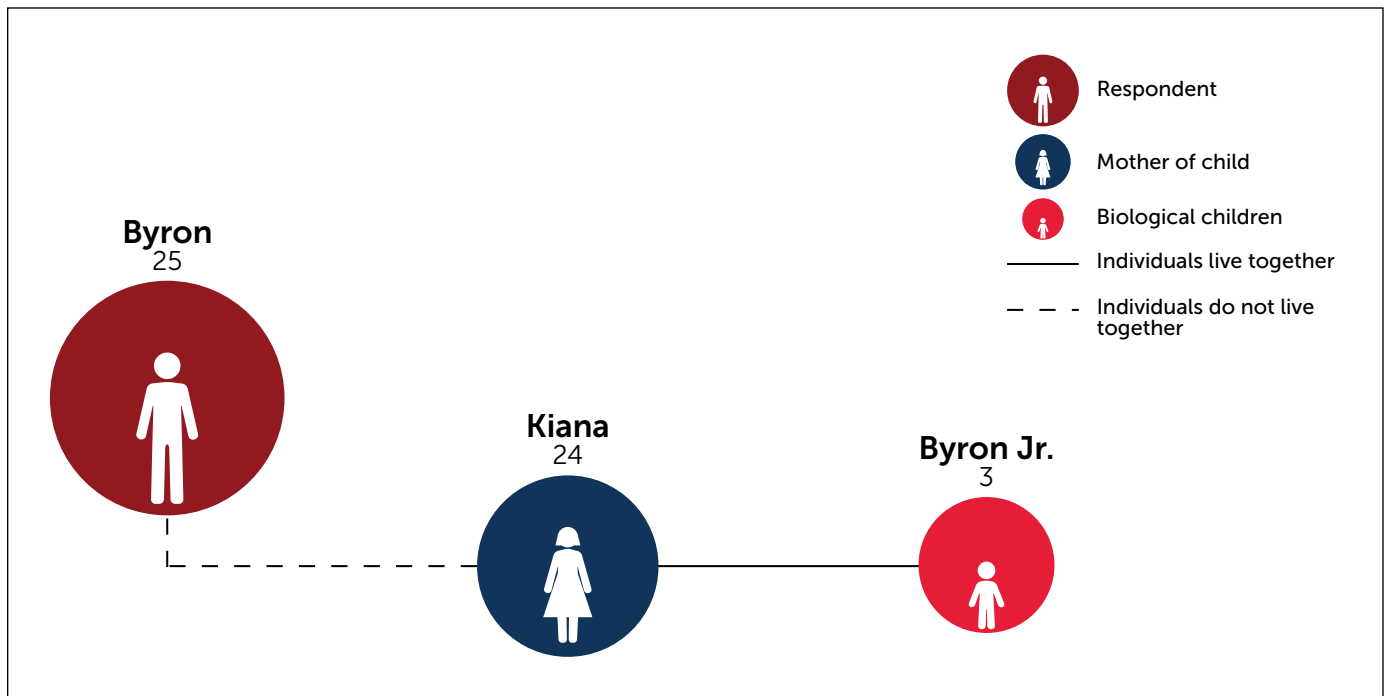
### Complexity of fathers' family networks

A key benefit of the qualitative study is that the in-depth interviews can help explain information collected through surveys. We use the interview data to examine the fathers' family networks, which can be complex given that about half of fathers had children with multiple mothers.

During each in-depth interview, the interviewer worked with the father to develop a Family Network Tree (FNT). The FNT facilitated a systematic examination into the structure and composition of each father’s current family network (for additional information see Appendix B). We use the information collected through these FNTs to characterize and illustrate the complexity of fathers’ family relationships.

Fathers’ family networks varied along a continuum from low to high in complexity. Fathers who had children with one partner had less complex family networks (Figure II.1). For example, Byron, a 25-year-old African American father, has a 3-year-old son. Byron is separated from the child’s mother, but she lives nearby and he sees his son nearly every day. He left his life of drug dealing behind and works construction as well as other “side jobs” to make ends meet. He says he is “not trying to be committed to anyone at this point” and is focused on “trying to get [his] life together.”

**Figure II.1. Example of a less complex Family Network Tree**

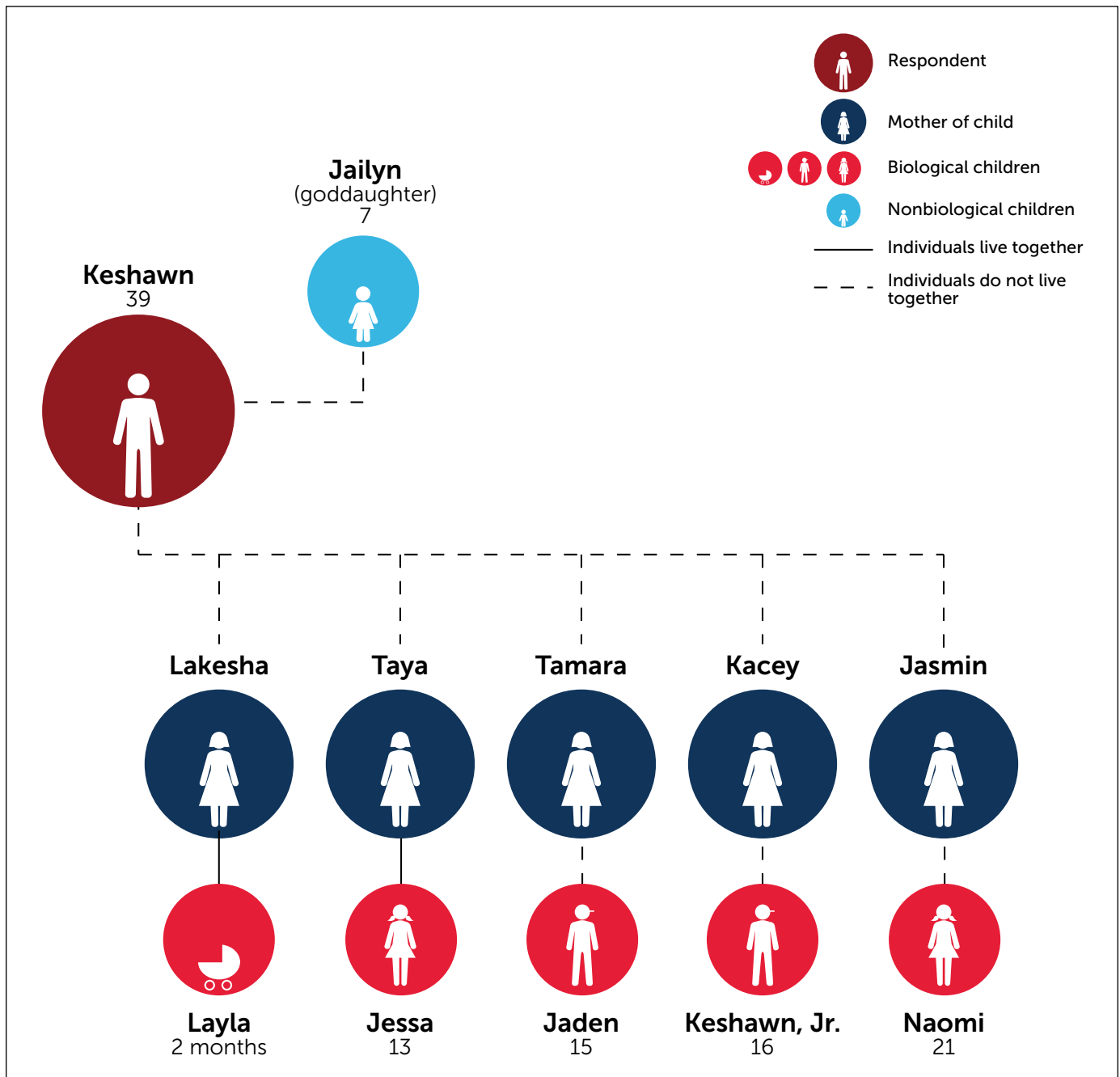


Fathers who had children with multiple partners had more complex family networks. The least complex of these family networks included a father with two children by two mothers, and the most complex—claimed by about 15 percent of fathers—included a father with four or more children by four or more partners. These networks can be further complicated by the fathers’ relationships with new partners.

An extreme example of a more complex family network is presented by Keshawn, a 39-year-old African American father who has five children with five different mothers (Figure II.2). As an older father, he recalls that he was not ready to be a father at the

time his first daughter was born (she is now 21 years old). He spent most of his life, until a few years ago, dealing and using drugs, and was only an inconsistent presence in his children’s lives. He is currently employed, clean and sober for the first time in at least five years, and working to reestablish relationships with his five children. He has a newborn child and is hoping he can correct some of the mistakes he made along the way with his older children. Keshawn acknowledges that the complexity of his situation is a lot to balance and that it makes developing meaningful relationships with his children difficult. This type of complex family network can become even more complicated when the children’s mothers have children by other fathers as well.

Figure II.2. Example of a more complex Family Network Tree



## **B. Fathers had varying levels of contact with different children**

The survey appears to tell two stories about father contact: many fathers had fairly frequent contact with at least one child (at least a few times a month), but half of fathers had infrequent to no contact with at least one child (less than a few times a month). Because many fathers have multiple children, the same father can have both more and less frequent contact, depending on the child. Information we collected from in-depth interviews with fathers makes it clear that the level of contact varied considerably. We used information drawn from the interviews to sort fathers into three groups and briefly describe these fathers below.<sup>8</sup>

### **Fathers with a pattern of frequent contact**

Just under half of fathers had frequent contact with all of their children. This included about 15 percent of fathers who lived with their children, and the rest who had frequent contact but did not live with their children. Those living with a child tended to be older (40 years old on average) and were less likely to be employed (29 percent) than other fathers in the study. Compared to these resident fathers, fathers who had frequent contact but did not live with all of their children were somewhat younger (33 years old on average) and were more likely to be working (52 percent). Fathers in this group often communicated informally with the mothers of their children to arrange times to see their children. Only a few in this group talked about having a formal parenting time agreement with scheduled visitation.<sup>9</sup>

### **Fathers with a pattern of infrequent contact**

Just over a quarter of fathers (28 percent) had infrequent contact with all of their children (defined as no more than one to two times per month) or no contact at all. Although more than half of these fathers were employed—a rate that exceeds that of the sample as a whole—almost 30 percent were in unstable housing at the time of the interviews. This reflected a much higher degree of economic instability, and these men also had other problems (mental and behavioral health issues, for example) at a higher rate than the fathers who had a pattern of frequent contact with their children. Most men in this group said they could not predict when they would next see their child. For fathers with no contact at all, the time that had elapsed since they had last seen their children varied from one to 14 years. The fathers in this group often said that they were striving to increase their involvement with their children, in person or otherwise.

### **Fathers with a pattern of uneven contact**

The remaining quarter of fathers had frequent contact with at least one child but infrequent to no contact with another. Virtually all of these fathers had children with multiple partners. These fathers tended to have more children (average of four children) than the sample as a whole. Overall, fathers were just as likely to have frequent contact with their older children as their younger children—about half of these fathers had more contact with their older children while about half had more contact with their younger children.

## Conclusion

Our study sample predominantly consists of low-income, African American men facing multiple challenges: low levels of education, employment, and earnings, and a history of involvement in the criminal justice system. Although most of these men were nonresident fathers, many had regular contact with one or more of their children. Fathers had family networks that ranged from simple to complex, and a father's level of involvement often varied across children. In the next chapter we discuss how men in the qualitative study perceived fatherhood, with a focus on how fatherhood changed the way they think and act, and the aspects of fatherhood they valued most.

### III. "IT'S ALL ABOUT THE KIDS" – THE MEANING OF FATHERHOOD



For the men interviewed for the qualitative study, fatherhood is a deeply meaningful experience. They view fatherhood as central to their identity and yearn to be more involved in their children's lives. They often see children as a catalyst for changing their own life course—exiting gangs, trading crime for conventional employment, and leaving substance abuse behind. Many fathers are driven by a desire to “be there” for their children, by maintaining an emotional connection with them and staying physically present in their lives. Many view fatherhood through the lens of their own life experiences, with a focus on steering their children away from the mistakes they had made.

These views about fatherhood may help explain why fathers are attracted to Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs. The men in the qualitative study often wanted to gain new skills so they could be better fathers and be more engaged in their children's lives. Some fathers were drawn to the fatherhood programs because they might help them reconnect with their children, even after years of separation. They were often eager to “get their lives together” so they could be better parents.

This chapter explores the meaning of fatherhood for the men enrolled in four RF programs. We begin with a discussion of how fatherhood affected these men's lives, both how they think and act, and then turn to the aspects of fatherhood that they valued most: “being there” for their children and providing them a better life.





### A. Men see fatherhood as a catalyst for their own life change

Becoming a father for the first time—or stepping into the father role after not being involved earlier in a child’s life—could transform men’s outlook on life, alter their decision making, and redirect their life course. Upon becoming a parent, many men came to the realization that they were no longer living just for themselves. For some, this meant they had to change the way they made decisions. Men used to living the “fast life” often felt it was imperative to “slow down,” to change their behaviors in order to fully embrace what they saw as the demands of fatherhood. For these men, what it meant to be a man was often viewed as synonymous with being a good father, especially in the domain of financial support. Accordingly, fathers who failed to provide financially for their children often felt they were falling short of what fatherhood—and manhood—required.

#### Focusing on their children: “It’s all about the kids.”

“I can’t just be selfish and think about myself no more. I’ve got somebody else that I have to take care of the next 18 years. . .”

Randy

More than a third of fathers said that fatherhood had motivated them to focus less on themselves. Being a father meant that “it’s not about me anymore” or, as a 28-year-old father of two, Isaac, put it, “you’re not living for yourself no more, you’re living for somebody else.” For these men, fatherhood represented a shift in priorities, from their own needs to the needs of their children. Duane, a 41-year-old father of six, told us, “Kids ground you, and you know you’re not living your life for yourself anymore.” Randy, a 35-year-old father who heavily used drugs until his daughter was born, talked about how his views changed at that time: “I can’t just be selfish and think about myself no more. I’ve got somebody else that I have to take care of for the next 18 years or for the rest of my life.”



For these men, children became the driving force behind their actions at some point in their lives. Nick, a 26-year-old father of two, summed up how his motivation changed as follows: “I know that it’s not about me anymore. I don’t mind that, you know, living for my daughter.” For some, such as 28-year-old Kemal, who learned he was a father through a paternity test, the motivation stemmed from the sense that they now had a reason to live:

Yeah, it felt good. . . . I mean when you got one reason to live and then you’ve got another then that puts another level of responsibility and integrity in your heart. I’ve got to do this for somebody else too. It was awesome.

Similarly, Cedric, a 30-year-old father of two, said his motivation flowed from a greater sense of purpose:

[My children] made me feel like my purpose was much greater. Like being there for [them] and watching them grow made me feel responsible. . . . I just love being there for my children. I just love it.

Becoming a father could also affect how fathers approached decisions. Willie, a 33-year-old father of three, said that having children, “make[s] you think a little more before you do stuff. . . . It really made me stronger especially with my thought process on things.” Vance, a 31-year-old father of two, said that once he became a father:

The decisions I make in my life are [now] decisions [about how it is] gonna affect them. Where if I didn’t have them, I could just go on and do whatever I want. But I just can’t do that now. You can’t. I don’t care what I do, it’s gonna always affect them. . . .

Many men noted feeling a greater sense of accountability, and for some this was a force powerful enough to turn them away from a lifestyle of street crime and substance abuse. For example, a 37-year-old father of two, Nathan, told us that before becoming a father:

I didn’t care. I had no remorse about anything. Family was it, but outside of that, everything else I believed in [involved] getting money however money need to be made. It wasn’t no sense of conscience or thinking of consequences of what I was doing. I didn’t have to think about that because it didn’t affect nobody really but me. But when you doing stuff now it’s affecting your children. When you go and you get incarcerated and you miss a birthday or you miss a holiday with your kids.

Transformations of the sort Nathan described might not be triggered by the birth of a father’s first child. Instead, change could occur years, even decades later as men matured. Sometimes, the turning point came with the birth of a second or subsequent child. Kelvin,

a 36-year-old father of seven, described how he finally stopped selling drugs after his fourth child (Tynice) was born: “That drug dealing stage, I think I left that alone in 2003 when Tynice was born. So I haven’t sold drugs or did drugs since. It’s been 10 years. When I had her that was my second daughter and I was like, ‘I know I’ve got to stop.’”

For some men, incarceration became a period of reflection that motivated them to reorient their lives around fatherhood. One father, James, said that he was “ripping, running the streets, getting high, drinking as much as I can” when he fathered his first child at 17. Soon after, he was convicted of a felony and spent 13 years in prison. When he had his second child, at the age of 46, he said he had become “someone that actually experienced life and [was] more mature.” As a result, he felt his children had “two different fathers.”

One 35-year-old father, Omari, regretted that he’d missed 10 years of his children’s lives due to incarceration. As he struggled to establish a relationship with his three children, Omari described how he had “journeyed through that situation where I didn’t really care about nobody’s feelings, but now as I’m older I noticed it’s really not about me no more.” Another father, 38-year-old Taylor who had been incarcerated for over seven years, felt that he had better contact with his youngest child because he had matured over time. There are 19 years between his oldest (age 22) and youngest child. He explained:

That’s my heart, that’s my youngest, I’ve got the opportunity [to really be a father to that child] out of all my children. Even though I was there with [my two oldest children] I still was in the street, so I really wasn’t there—it was more [giving them] money. But with [my youngest daughter] I’ve had the opportunity to actually see her grow. . . . Taught her how to walk, taught her how to . . . use the bathroom, taught her how to ride her bike, taught her to throw a ball, taught her how to get dressed. . . . That’s why some of my [older] kids get jealous but they not understanding that it’s a difference between how I lived then to now. It’s a maturity level from then to now. I’ve grown. . .

“Then I had my son and it changed my life, I wanted to do something better in life. This is a whole new trick for me.”

Jason

### Turning their lives around: “I’m not going to be no help to my kids in prison or dead”

Almost half of fathers said that fatherhood pulled them away from activities that could have put them at risk of death or incarceration. As a result, a common refrain was that “if I didn’t have kids, I would probably be either dead or in prison.” For example, 23-year-old Jason, who had grown up in foster care and had started selling drugs at a very young age, described the profound impact becoming a parent had on his life trajectory: “The street life was my life through childhood. . . . [Two months] before my son was born I was incarcerated. Then I had my son and it changed my life, I wanted to do something better in life. This is a whole new trick for me.” Jason explained, “Oh, it’s no more playing no more. It’s no more faking, I can’t go to jail, I need to [be] out there with him, with her. I gotta be there, man.”

Fathers often referred to this redirection in their trajectories as “slowing down.” Slowing down was usually explicitly motivated by a desire to play a significant role in their children’s lives. A 25-year-old father of one, Alonso, told us:

[It’s because of my] child, I wanted to be in his life. I want to be the real father to him. I don’t want him to be 15 or 20 years old and just now we’re getting a relationship. I don’t want that to happen. I want to get in his life and be the father as soon as possible.

Nineteen-year-old Leroy had never seen his own father, a man who was “really big into drugs” and deserted the family before Leroy was born. Leroy, who began selling drugs at a young age, stopped when he learned he was about to have a son. Unlike his own father, he wanted to ensure he would be there for his son:

[I sold drugs from] about the age of 14 until I found out we were having [our son]. Then I quit doing everything. . . . I gave that all up. That’s behind me now. I don’t plan on ever doing that again because my real dad, I guess, he was really big into drugs. . . . Growing up I kind of realized like man, I’m turning into my dad with all this drugs and stuff and that just . . . flipped a switch ‘cause I want nothing to do with him. So I gave all that up and then [our son] came, that just put that more like “Okay, never again am I going to do that.”

Preston, a 31-year-old father of four who had been arrested several times and had spent time in a group home for delinquent teens, felt that slowing down saved him from prison:

I love my kids. I really don’t know where I’d be. I can’t even tell you. Who would know? Like I said, they changed me. . . . Far as staying out of these streets. I was doing everything. . . . Just bad stuff—I don’t even want to talk about that—just everything. I changed. I’m just glad of that because maybe I probably would be locked up. You never know, especially with that lifestyle, where I would be. When I had my kids, it made me slow down, think more.

Many men, like 27-year-old Rashaad, described how “the streets raised me”—their fathers were absent and their mothers worked multiple jobs. Like several other fathers, he believed that having his first child (Aikira)—and slowing down—saved his life:

I’d be in jail. Dead or in jail. I would have been out of here. I ain’t got nothing to hold me back. I’d have a lot more money in my pocket too, I would. I’d have made a lot more risks to get that money in my pocket. I really would’ve. But they saved me, they did. They gave me something to . . . Not even they. Aikira. It’s solely her. Because by the time Carrina and Jonell was here I was good. But it’s all Aikira. She’s the reason why I’m still here the way I am.

Some who had been drug dealers claimed that becoming a father provided an acceptable excuse for exiting “the drug community”—a decision that would otherwise have put them in danger. One father said that his associates let him go “because everybody has a general sense . . . in the drug community . . . that when it comes to family, you just got to let [the fathers] go . . . because that’s family. . . . There’s blood . . . you can’t top that.” Caleb, a 26-year-old father of two, describes his children as “shields” that allowed him to break off ties with delinquent peers:

When I first had Lakesia, [they] used to knock on the door, “Caleb – hey – what’s up? You coming out?” . . . A lot of times I come outside and I had [my kids] intentionally [with me so I could say] “Nah, I got my baby with me, we’re taking us a walk. . . .” I use them as shields . . . , a way of not telling you no. I can throw it off on them.



### **The responsibilities of fatherhood: “You’re there to take care of your family”**

Becoming a father required more of men than turning away from the negative influences in their lives; they also had to meet their responsibilities as fathers. When asked what it meant to be a good father, men returned regularly in their narratives to the significance of providing financially for their children. For example, Kemal, a 28-year-old father of one, told us:

I don’t say . . . “Am I going to go to work today . . . ?” I only . . . make decisions that are going to benefit [my child] and not [negatively] affect her even if I am not with her. I’m making decisions to support Salenna.

Isaac espoused similar beliefs:

When I had my first daughter, that changed a whole lot 'cause you're not living [for] yourself no more, you're living for somebody else. You had to work, you got to make things happen, you got to grow into a man and be a provider. That's when that happen, when I first feel myself being a man. Eighteen, right out of high school . . . I had to buy food, Enfamil, Gerber, pacifier, car seat, Pampers, clothes, that's how I was the provider. Working long shifts at that time at Hardee's.

" . . . instill values in your kids, let them know how life is and the road that you took that they don't want to go down."

Randy

Like the two fathers quoted above, men often focused on the importance of "having that job, going to work," needing to "make sure that all the bills are paid," and being able to "provide for [my] family." Randy, a 36-year-old father of two who was striving to be more involved in his daughter's life added another condition of fatherhood: earning money "the legal way":

More responsibility, more responsible, get out there and make it, earn money the legal way, be there for your family, be able to sit at the kitchen table with your family. Eat together and instill values in your kids, let them know how life is and the road that you took that they don't want to go down. You just being a man to let them know that these are things that I went through that I don't want y'all to go through them, I want y'all to do better.

Independence—not having to rely on others—was another key theme that emerged when fathers were asked to reflect on what it meant to be a good father. For example, one father emphasized the importance of carrying "oneself as his own, not have to always depend on anybody." When asked to describe what being a good father involved, Quentin, a 30-year-old father of two, responded:

Handling everything because everything is supposed to be on our shoulders. I feel like just being able to [handle] everything, you know, having that job, going to work, coming home, kids getting off the bus, you know, fixing dinner, just a lot of that.

Tyrese, a 29-year-old father of three, explained that a good father ought to be the glue that keeps the family together: ". . . you hold your fort down by any means necessary because you are the gorilla glue that keeps everything together, mom, kids. You keep all of it together and all of that."

Even those men who were not currently providing for their children recognized that providing was something a "good dad" does. Marquis, for example, a 28-year-old father of one who is homeless and struggling to obtain his GED, told us:

A good father to me is being about your child. I haven't been that. I see a couple of my friends that are real good dads. They're dudes I used to run with, running the streets with. They changed their life. They don't go out and do none of that stuff. They go to work and be with their family.

The importance of providing financially was also mentioned when fathers were asked to name the most difficult aspect of being a father. As described by Rashaad:

Not being able to give them the things that I know would make them happy. Like man, just buying them things to see them smile. Like, here. Just . . . it's hard not being able to get them, when I see it and I just be like damn I want my son or damn I want my daughter to have that, and not being able to do it. That's hard. It's hard.

Similarly, Jair, a 37-year-old father of four, felt that he had let his children down by not finding a job:

The toughest part of being a dad is when you can't provide for your kids like you want to. That part hurts. You made these promises to the kids, thinking you're going to get this job and then it crumbles up, you don't even get the job, and your kids probably feel like you broke a promise.

In men's narratives about what it meant to be a good father, they often referred to what it meant to be a man. Some saw fulfilling their financial obligations to their children as synonymous with being a man. Also evident in these accounts is the view that men living the "fast life"—on drugs or not working in the formal economy—not only are poor fathers, but are not fully men, a critique some men leveled at others and some at themselves.

### **B. Fathers focus on giving their children a better life**

Talking about the role that fathers should play in the lives of their children, the men touched on two main aspects of fatherhood: "steering on the right path" and "being present." Men often viewed fatherhood from the perspective of their own life experiences, with some emphasizing the need to ensure their children did not make the same mistakes they had made earlier in their lives. These fathers focused on providing the structure and guidance needed to steer their children in the right direction. In addition, some fathers were motivated by a desire to parent differently than their own father or mother and they hoped to give their children better lives by being more supportive than either or both of their parents had been. Many of the fathers also talked about the importance of "being there" for their children, having a presence in their children's lives and establishing a connection with them.



### **Steering children away from fathers' mistakes: "The right road, . . . not the street road"**

For about a third of fathers interviewed, being a good father meant in part guiding children away from following in their footsteps. As stated by Jair, a good father can "guide them down the right path so they won't make the same mistake you made. Instead of going through the circle you teach them how to go around the circle." These fathers viewed fatherhood through the perspective of their own life experiences. Omari told his son, "Don't go down the road I did because you know what it leads to."

These fathers wanted to give their children a better life, and steer them from the threats and dangers often associated with life in low-income communities. Jason talked about the desire to give his son a better life and to keep him out of trouble:

I'm going to be there for my son . . . show him the ropes and the routines, where to go and the roads not to take. 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 become 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.

In discussing their efforts to shield their children from negative influences in their neighborhoods, more than a third of fathers said they felt a responsibility to provide their children with "structure." Fathers emphasized the need to provide children discipline, to teach younger children basic skills and older children values and morals (e.g., how to be a good man or woman, avoiding unwanted pregnancies, the dangers of drugs). Mark, a 30-year-old father of one son, told us:

Without that element of structure and discipline you might as well be another drug dealer. . . . What's going to stop him from stepping in the same fillable shoes that anybody in this society could step into? . . . They're there for anybody. . . . I fell into them. . . . But if I'm able to provide the structure and support he might not even need to consider that. . . . A good father provides support, structure, and discipline . . . especially if you have a boy and you know that you want to turn him into a man one day.

### **Being a better parent than their own father**

When discussing the goal of giving their children a better life, several fathers focused on parenting differently from how they were raised. For example, Cedric, who grew up without his father, said, "I wanted to be together [with the child's mother], raise my children in the same household," although he noted that it ultimately "didn't work out" despite trying "for many years." Another father, Gabriel, talked about how "I didn't have anybody really to support my thoughts or my feelings or my dreams [while growing up]." So he is "really

mindful of that now” and listens closely to “what’s going on with them [his kids] or how they’re feeling or allow them to give their feedback without . . . saying something crazy over what they’re saying.” D’angelo, a 37-year-old father of two, said he wanted to raise his children differently from his father: “When I was a little kid my dad didn’t tell me he loved me. Like, ‘I love you son. . . .’ I make sure I do tell my son that so he’ll know.”

“When I was a little kid my dad didn’t tell me he loved me. . . . I make sure that I do tell my son that so he’ll know.”

D’angelo

For some fathers, parenting differently from their own father (or, in some cases, also their mother) was viewed as a reward of fatherhood. Xavier, a 41-year-old father of two explained the best part of being a father was, “Knowing that I’m better than my dad. That’s probably the best part. Because I know that I’m doing it a lot better than he ever could have done it. And I’m not a disappointment.” Similarly, Willie, a 33-year old father, felt that the best part of fatherhood was providing his kids with the structure missing from his own childhood:

The best part of being a dad is being able to give your kids structure and show them how to do something different because for me it was like I never really had my father in my life, so I made a vow when I was a kid that when I had kids that I ain’t going to run away . . . no matter what the situation is, I’m going to stick right there . . . so even with us [he and his partner] separating and stuff, I still was there.

Diondre, a 34-year-old father of two, described his father’s absence as motivation for “being there” for his own children:

Growing up my childhood was a bad childhood because my father had passed when I was two and my mother was strung out on drugs. It was kind of a bad childhood. When I had my children I told myself I would do anything and try to be there for my kids and make sure I’m there for my kids no matter what.

Rather than focusing on parenting differently than their parents, some of the men who had fathers present in their lives talked about their desire to be there for their children just as their own fathers had been. Kurtis, a 31-year-old father, said, “I wanted to be there for Marvin [his son] like my dad was there. And it was like I said, it was my first son, my only child, and I wanted to be there. I wanted to see him grow up. I wanted to see what he did with his life.”

### **The importance of just “being there” for children and for themselves**

Nearly three in four fathers described how “just being there” for their children was a core part of responsible fatherhood. The effort to do so, they argued, was beneficial to both their children and themselves. “Being there” consisted of opportunities to spend time with their children—being physically and emotionally there for them—even if they could not support their children financially. As Vincent, a 23-year-old father of a 4-year-old, put it:



It shouldn't even matter about your finances because you're not always going to have money. If you can be there for your child, spend that time with them, then that's probably the most important thing.

"I want to just show him I'm there for him, 'Daddy doesn't have it all and I don't have the world, but if I could give it to you, I would.'"

Zakary

Zakary expressed a similar feeling when talking about what motivates him to make the three-hour bus ride to see his son on his birthday: "I want to just show him I'm there for him. 'Daddy doesn't have it all and I don't have the world but if I could give it to you, I would.' And just showing him that I love him and I want to be there for him." Marquis, a 28-year-old father of one, underscored the importance of "being there": "To actually be present and you're not doing it for any other reason but out of the love of your heart . . . you want to be there for your child, it's just the biggest accomplishment and greatest thing of all."

Fathers focused on different aspects of "being there." Some emphasized the importance of providing emotional support and security or having an emotional connection with their children. For Manuel, a 42-year-old father, the focus was on his children being able to:

. . . count on you and look up to you . . . and being able to have your kids be like, 'You know what, Daddy? I love you, I miss you.' And being able to say it back and giving them the hugs and the kisses and being able to be their security blanket and somebody that they know that will look out for them, to count on.



Cedric also highlighted a father's role in providing emotional support: "I take great joy in that, being able to be there for them [my kids] when they need things. If they had troubles, or a fear or something, me being able to be their security."

Other fathers referred to "being there" in terms of having a physical presence in their children's lives. Ervin, a 39-year-old father of one, talked about "spending quality time" with his daughter and "letting her know that her dad is here for her." Having a physical presence

was important to fathers, even when they could not provide financially. As Willie, a 33-year-old father of three, conveyed: “It’s about being able to spend that time, that quality time and for them to be there with you . . . they ain’t always care about you not having no money. Kids just want to be around you.” Being “present,” of course boils down to something more specific—what fathers do with their children when they are together, a range of activities that reflects the ages of their children and their own life circumstances (see the box below).

### “Spending time with my kids”: Common father-child activities

Fathers placed a high value on the time they spent with their children. They engaged in diverse activities focused both on play time and family time, as well as time together to provide advice and guidance.

**PLAY TIME.** Play activities were the primary way that fathers were involved with their children. Fathers of younger children (aged 3–5) played age-appropriate games like hide-and-seek or took their children to a park or playground. Fathers of older children engaged in playing sports together, watching TV, and playing video games. Some fathers also mentioned taking their children to events or places such as museums, birthday parties, or arcades.

Andre, a father of six, enjoys many activities with his daughters: “We go to the park . . . tomorrow we’re going to the pumpkin patch to pick them up some pumpkins. We play games, Monopoly, we play hide-and-seek. . . . We have movie nights. They big on daddy-daughter time . . . it’s just me and them.”

**FAMILY TIME.** Eating together, going to church, and visiting extended family were all examples of family-time activities that fathers engaged in with their children.

Ramon, a father of two, said that when he has his children on the weekends, “it’s either bowling, movie . . . I always make sure we do something. Sunday is pretty much when we will go visit my grandmother, the one in the nursing home . . . and we either go over to my brother’s house or to a family function.”

**GUIDANCE.** When spending time with their children, fathers often said they took the opportunity to talk to them and teach them about life. In particular, they talked to their children—especially those already headed down the “wrong path”—about how to avoid mistakes that they had made themselves in their youth, such as past incarceration or gang involvement.

Lamar, a father of two, advised his son to steer off his current path. “This all might seem fun right now but as you grow up you’re going to regret a lot of this. . . . You need to get with it now before it’s too late. . . . Look at me . . . I’ve got a bullet hole in my jaw and I’m in a group home for disabled people and . . . no job, and hardly any clothes. You want to be like me, keep it up.”

Some life lessons were a little less serious, focusing on issues like basic hygiene, but important nonetheless. Andre said that with his boys he “plays basketball, talk[s] about girls, and talk[s] about hygiene.” Andre told his sons, “You in high school man . . . get your butt in the shower. You know what I’m saying? Cleanliness is next to godliness. And when you in high school the last thing you want to be is the stinky boy.”



Some fathers described how “being there” could mean different things depending on the father’s situation. Vaughn, a father of three who was recently released after seven years in prison, described the toughest part of fatherhood in this way:

Not being able to be there for them. Not being a smile on their face. . . . Not being able to be supportive. I wouldn’t care if it’s financial, physical, or spiritual. One of them three is enough for any father. If you ain’t got the money, give them the time. If you got money and ain’t got the time, give them the money and a card and let them know you’re really thinking about them.

Duane moved across the country to be closer to his oldest son. He explained, “I need to have a relationship with my children. . . . I moved here because of my son. I knew somehow I need to be closer, a little closer, where I can physically see him.”

Some fathers responded to the need to do what their own fathers did not—to be, at a minimum, visibly present in their children’s lives. Hence, for many fathers, not being absent was a hallmark feature of what a father is supposed to do. Jayden, a 40-year-old man who never knew his father, told us, “You have to be there because . . . all of the times I thought about my dad, I didn’t care about what he had, I just wanted him to play catch with me sometimes.”

## Conclusion

The men we spoke to placed great emphasis and value on their roles as fathers, and took their obligations toward their children seriously. They spoke about the changes becoming a father induced in their outlooks and orientations toward life. Yet many came to this realization later in their parental careers, after extensive periods of street life or incarceration. While these experiences may have been a “wake-up call” about the importance of being there for their children, they also meant that the men were ill-equipped to suddenly be an effective parent and provide stable financial support. Even those men who hadn’t spent years engaged in crime or substance abuse faced many challenges simply because of a lack of education and opportunities in the areas in which they lived. And no matter their own trajectories as adults, there is one common factor across the majority of men that made it difficult for them to fully become the parents they wanted to be for their children: their own troubled childhoods and lack of positive family role models, a topic we turn to in the following chapter.

## IV. “IT WAS ROUGH” – UNSTABLE FAMILY LIVES DURING CHILDHOOD



The most common motivation driving the men in this study to be an active force in their children’s lives is the recollection of their own childhoods. Fathers reported that they were determined to give their children a better life than they had and to do better by their children than their own fathers did by them. The in-depth interviews focused in part on fathers’ early lives and family relationships to illuminate why these men’s childhood experiences influenced their fatherhood views in this way.

Accounts of their childhoods were commonly filled with stories about the absence or limited involvement of their biological father—or any strong father figure.

Most fathers lived childhoods marked by poverty and family instability. Accounts of their childhoods were commonly filled with stories about the absence or limited involvement of their biological father—or any strong father figure—and about early exposure to substance abuse and violence. Their mothers were a more consistent presence during their childhoods, although some of those mothers had their own share of personal challenges that affected their ability to parent. Extended family members—especially grandmothers—sometimes played an instrumental role in providing financial or emotional support, or both.

While the majority of fathers had a difficult family life as children, almost a third of the men described having good relationships with their fathers and positive recollections of their childhoods, with few to none of the challenges discussed below. Compared to those who described less stable childhoods, these fathers were more than twice as likely to have been raised by both parents or by grandparents. About half of these men—about one-sixth of all the study participants—portrayed their fathers as providing guidance and financial support, “keeping promises,” and being in frequent contact either in person or by phone.

### A. Growing up without positive father role models

"I didn't know my dad really that well . . . Sometimes he would call and be like 'I'm going to come by and pick you up' but he'd never show up."

D'angelo

Most of the fathers we interviewed had experienced "father absence" as children. Over two-thirds grew up in households in which their biological fathers were not present for at least some portion of their lives. About 20 percent of all fathers said they had never met their father or had met him only in their teens or as adults. Others said that their fathers were "in and out" of their lives to varying degrees—not "absent" but also not "present." For example, Caleb, 26 years old, talked about how he and his father would "hang out a while and then he'd run off again. . . . A lot of times it was work and sometimes it was his own personal reasons. . . . But he'll pop in and pop out, I mean, that's my father." D'angelo, 37 years old, said of his father, "I didn't know my dad really that well. . . . Sometimes he would call and be like 'I'm going to come by and pick you up' but he'd never show up."

Their fathers' drug or alcohol abuse and the physical or emotional abuse that men witnessed between their fathers and mothers or that they suffered themselves, all figured heavily in men's narratives of the limited role their fathers played in their childhoods. Sherwin, 32 years old, explained that "[the] reason why I'm in [the state where I live] is because my Mom moved to get away from my Dad because my Dad used to beat her." For Cedric, 30 years old, whose father "bolted" when he was 9 and never came back, it was "drugs, drugs and my mama got tired of it. She said she couldn't take it no more. He had a drug addiction that led to a lot of stealing, and all that [violence]. . . . Yeah, it was very tough, very tough. . . ." Dan, a 31-year-old who described his father as "being there sometimes," felt that his father "wanted to party more than take care of me and my sister, so he took on this other lifestyle I don't really know much about. . . ."





While father absence was sometimes due to a mother’s desire to “get away” from her partner’s abusive or drug-using ways, some men described childhood homes where their abusive fathers were present (or sporadically so). Twenty-six-year-old Xavier, for example, recalled getting abused by his father “all the time” and also talked about the domestic violence he witnessed:

My father . . . was a drug addict. He was abusive. . . . As a young boy . . . I thought that that was the right thing to do. . . . I mean, when he was on drugs and he felt that my mom was not really paying him any [attention] . . . his way of intimidating her [was] by putting his hands on her. . . . So I grew up just seeing that and it kind of like took a toll on me psychologically. It messed me up a little bit.”

Likewise, Walker, 32 years old, attributed the physical abuse he suffered to his father’s poor disciplining skills, explaining that his father: “did some abuse, like physical abuse. . . . He didn’t really know how to discipline so [he] went overboard.” Walker was well into his twenties and was seeing a therapist before he could recognize “how it [the abuse] affected [his] relationships with women.” Antwon, a 46-year-old who had grown up in the housing projects, described the connection between his father’s alcoholism and violent behavior:

My father, he was a chronic alcoholic for a long time. I mean chronic. He used to drink rubbing alcohol. . . . It seemed like when he got drunk he got violent. . . . I didn’t like when he got drunk because he wasn’t himself.

For the men whose own fathers were incarcerated while they grew up—slightly less than one-fifth of the sample—prison imposed a physical, and often emotional, separation. Vincent, 23 years old, succinctly summed up prison’s impact on his relationship with his father: “My father, he was in and out of prison all my life so there’s nothing really much to say about him because I didn’t know him that much.” Incarceration also led to biological fathers missing out on entire childhoods—even, as in the case of 39-year-old Ervin, entire lives: “It was kind of rough because my father wasn’t around. . . . He was actually in a penitentiary for murder. When he got out last year, that’s the first time I met him, and then he passed away.”

“My father, he was in and out of prison all my life so there’s nothing really much to say about him because I didn’t know him that much.”

Vincent

Isaac, 28 years old, was able to maintain some contact with his father who served a long prison term that ended after Isaac turned 18. By that time Isaac had come to terms with the absence of his father and he “really wasn’t mad at him” anymore. Some of the men with incarcerated fathers were left wondering where their fathers had gone or when, if ever, they would return. Looking back on his childhood, Latrelle, 27 years old, recalled, “I remember periods of time . . . where I’m like, ‘Damn! Where’s my dad at? Where’s my dad at?’ My dad’s in prison or my dad’s in jail.”

Even as adults, the men expressed conflicted feelings over the persistent or intermittent absence of their fathers from their lives.

Even as adults, the men expressed conflicted feelings over the persistent or intermittent absence of their fathers from their lives. Dan still looked up to his father even though he was often absent during his childhood, explaining, “My dad was in and out [of] my whole life. Regardless of that I always looked up to the dude. Now I kind of hold some resentments but he was always my idol.” Manuel, 42 years old, felt rejected by his own father, who was never “in the home” and instead off with “other women” and “creating other families.” Manuel still found it difficult to talk about his father, admitting that it was a “touchy subject because it kind of makes my eyes swell up.” He explained, “The thing with my father, I can honestly say, I never really like[d] him. I can honestly say that I had a lot of hatred for him growing up.”



Sometimes a mother’s subsequent partner played a part in the lives of the men we interviewed. While the biological fathers of these men were often in and out of their lives or altogether absent while they were growing up, about a third of men discussed experiences—both positive and negative—involving their mothers’ subsequent partners.

For some men, their mothers’ husbands or boyfriends served as a father figure, not only providing financial support but also being very involved in their lives, helping them in their transition to manhood, and affirming through example the importance of providing for one’s family. Thirty-year-old Emmett described his stepfather as “just a good male role model. A good typical American male dad. Took the trash out, mowed the lawn, went to work on time, brought home the checks, barbecued, watched football, those type of things.”

Preston, a 31-year-old who described his relationship with his stepfather as “great,” went on to explain that his stepfather “taught me a lot of stuff, as most fathers do when they got a son, that’s how they do; raise you from a seed, teach you all these little things. . . . He would take me fishing . . . come to my games.” As these descriptions suggest, the traditional role and responsibilities associated with being a father resonated deeply with these men.

Just as often, however, men described stepfathers or mothers’ boyfriends as physically or emotionally abusive toward them, their mothers, or both. Like the biological fathers described above, stepfathers sometimes exposed these men early in their lives to alcohol and drug use, which was often tied to abusive behaviors. Jamar, 23 years old, recalled that his “stepfather used to beat us with switches and extension cords,” just as his own father used to beat him and his siblings with “his feet and his fists.” Quincy, 35 years old, described his stepfather as “mean” and recognized early on that “he just wasn’t right. . . . He was a womanizer, he beat on me, he molested my sister. . . . Ain’t nothing right in him.” As described later in this chapter, men sometimes attributed their early exposure to violence, drugs, and strife from fathers and father figures as an explanation for exhibiting similar behaviors in their own lives.

### **B. Supported by their mothers and extended family**

Men generally cast their relationships with their own mothers in a far more positive light than their relationships with their fathers. Many characterized their mothers as “hardworking” and “strong” figures who were primarily responsible for raising them. Byron, 25 years old, spoke of how his mother worked two jobs and “was like the rock of the family,” and 40-year-old Jayden had high regard for his mother, noting, “Me and my mom got along really well. She was always at work, she had two kids to take care of but that’s got to be the strongest lady I’ve ever met in my life. . . .” This sentiment was echoed by Vaughn, 35 years old, whose father was “in and out” of his life. His mother, in contrast, was always there for him: “Ah man, that’s a strong little woman. . . . we’ve been through a lot together. She ain’t left me, not one time. . . . If I call my mama, she shows up.”

The emotional support received from mothers, and mothers’ willingness to help during times of trouble, were also often highlighted and appreciated. Thirty-five-year-old Randy, for example, described how his mother was always there to help him out:

*Whenever I have any kind of issues, no matter what it is, she was there to take care of it. Let’s say if I got in trouble with the law, she was right there to help me get out of it. If I needed to get bailed out . . . she would find a way to bail me out. If I had any court or anything like that she was always coming in with me to make sure that things would go right. . . . When it came to any situation she was always there to help.*



Although mothers were generally a more consistent and supportive presence during men's childhoods than biological fathers, this was certainly not universally the case. Some, like 28-year-old Marquis, who saw his father only once after the age of 7 and lived with a variety of relatives during his teen years, felt as though the emotional support and guidance he needed from his mother took a backseat to other demands. Marquis noted that his mother "wasn't a bad mom, she was just young and she was working so hard. . . . I needed guidance so bad and there was nobody there to give me guidance." Likewise, 27-year-old Rashaad appreciated his mother's efforts to financially support the family but felt that he lacked the parental guidance and supervision he sorely needed:

So, TV raised us. The streets raised me. My mom had to work all the time. She was just there to beat my ass if she found out I did anything that she didn't like. But she was gone. . . . You really don't have no guidance around the house if your mother's gone, your father just ain't never been there, your mom have work. So my guidance was just nonexistent.

Carl, a 39-year-old who ended up living with and being legally adopted by his grandmother, felt that his young teen mother (just 14 years old) was ill-equipped to take on the responsibility of parenthood: "My mother used to abuse me and you know, we had, I had a pretty rough life growing up at an early age. My mom, she was probably impatient. You know, impatient with having a kid and being a kid herself. She was a lot impatient." Thirty-four-year-old Diondre had no fond memories of his childhood, which was marked by his mother's drug use and the absence of his father in his life: "Growing up my childhood was a bad childhood because my father had passed when I was 2 and my mother was strung out on drugs."

Extended family members sometimes stepped in to provide financial and emotional support or opened their homes to these fathers when they were growing up, often in response to family conflict, abusive situations, or drug and alcohol use by their parents. Slightly more than one-quarter of fathers described childhoods in which their extended families (usually grandmothers and aunts) were primarily responsible for "raising" them or providing a place to live, often for an extended period. A few even reported that their extended families had gained legal custody of them. In addition, another quarter of fathers described having a very close relationship with one or more extended family members and provided numerous examples of how various relatives "took up for us when we were in trouble" and filled a parental role.

Walker credited his grandparents for keeping his family afloat economically, and viewed his grandparents "more as my parents for real, because they were there more than my mother was." Walker's father, who he described as being physically abusive during his early childhood, had been out of the picture for several years. Similarly, Antwon remembered spending "a lot of time at my grandmother's house. . . . She took

care of me and my cousins. . . . We would go places . . . to the zoo, parks. She did a lot of things with us, things that my father didn't do because he was drinking. So my grandmother, I guess she took the slack."

Fathers often referred to the extended family members who helped them during these difficult times of family crisis as important role models or as father figures. Uncles and grandfathers in particular were identified by some as father figures during their childhood. Fathers described these male relatives as teaching them about the tenants of manhood or fatherhood, underscoring the importance of work, giving them guidance about life, and "always being there" for them. Zakary recalled:

My grandfather was a quiet man but he . . . led a lot through his actions. . . . He went to work. He took care of his family. He loved the Lord. He was a very positive figure in my life and I had that to look up to. . . . I grew up in the hood, around a lot of drugs and prostitution, a lot of different things, but I always remember he used to come pick me up from Sunday school . . . and he just used to talk to me a lot, always telling me education was key.

"My mother started doing drugs and my father was in jail so they [the gang] was my second home. They helped me when I needed help."

Hareem

### C. Neighborhood influences

Fathers sometimes experienced instability in the context of neighborhoods marked by drugs and gang violence. In turn, almost a third of fathers described how they joined gangs or sold drugs during their youth. Many of these fathers talked about getting involved in drugs and gangs "early," around 12 to 13 years of age. Some of these fathers attributed taking this path to the lack of a strong parental presence or the need for belonging and refuge. Hareem, 39 years old, recounts why he joined a gang: "My mother started doing drugs and my father was in jail so they [the gang] was my second home. They helped me when I needed help."

Sometimes fathers easily fell in with gangs and selling or using drugs because members of their family or household—fathers, stepfathers, mothers' current partners, siblings, uncles—were engaged in that lifestyle. Tyrese, a 29-year-old who shot his first pistol and was on the streets selling drugs by age 14, recalled his mother's boyfriend using crack cocaine at the house and learning from him how to package drugs for sale: "That's where I learned how to bag dope up, bag weed up, all that shit. . . . And then, the other one [a different boyfriend], that's when I first saw crack. Not cocaine, not the powder base. I'm talking about the stones."

A few fathers indicated that they got involved with gangs or drugs because that was all they knew growing up in a rough neighborhoods where drug trafficking flourished. Jason, 23 years old, explained that "everything you need is in the streets man . . . all you know is the streets. You know how it is, that's the lifestyle." A small number said they engaged in gang or drug-related activities out of a desire to provide financially

for themselves because their families' resources were so limited. Omari, 35 years old, explained that during his teens he "wanted to be the man of the house" because:

I was taught that when a father is not around and you have a lot of sons, it's time for them to step up and take care of the household . . . but I did it by doing it the wrong way. Selling drugs and that's something that [my mama] didn't approve of.

Men's involvement in drugs and gangs during their youth often led to detrimental outcomes like substance abuse, addiction, violence, and jail time. Reflecting on his days in gangs during his youth, 28-year-old Kemal noted:

I went to prison when I was 18 so you are looking at a time span from 14 to 18 and in those four years I just got into a lot of fights. A lot of times I was shot at and I'm grateful I didn't get shot. . . .

While street life was filled with dangers of its own kind, it also offered at least some fathers not only a source of income but also acceptance and belonging. As Mitchell, 32 years old, told us, "I can't lie, the streets will always embrace you. It will always be there. The streets never change."



## Conclusion

Most men in our study came from family backgrounds where fathers were absent, stepfathers and mothers' boyfriends were abusive, and involvement in gangs and selling drugs at a young age was not uncommon. In addition, some of the men experienced fewer challenges and had more positive childhood experiences, including consistent relationships with their fathers. These childhood experiences affected fathers' views not only of what it meant to be a good father, but also of what it takes to be in a healthy, positive relationship with a partner. Some fathers attributed their later contentious and unstable relationships to their exposure to abuse, drinking and substance abuse, or bad relationships between their mothers and fathers or stepfathers while growing up. Consequently, the RF programs provided an opportunity for many of these men to learn what they were never taught from their own families about good parenting and positive relationships, and to unlearn some negative lessons from their own parents. As we will see, fathers' relationships with the mothers of their children presented yet another obstacle to overcome. These relationships were all too often characterized not by partnership and collaboration, but by conflict, mistrust, and even abuse.

## V. “SHE MAKES IT REALLY HARD TO BE A DAD” – RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE MOTHERS OF THEIR CHILDREN



Men’s relationships with the mothers of their children were often marked by conflict and instability, even before their children were conceived. Pregnancy generally occurred early in the relationships described by the fathers in this study, and in most cases by accident rather than design. While in some instances conception solidified the partnership, more often tensions persisted through the pregnancy and continued after the child was born.

Intimate partner violence—perpetrated by the man, the woman, or both—was all too common in the relationships these men described, while anger management, conflict resolution, and communication skills appear from fathers’ own accounts to be sorely lacking. Fathers’ lifestyles and personal challenges and those of their children’s mothers contributed to this conflict. Many of the relationships broke up due to these problems—problems that in some cases were exacerbated by infidelity (whether suspected or confirmed) on the part of one or both partners.

It is no surprise, then, that for the men in this study, the primary barrier to fathers’ continued involvement with their children is the ongoing contentious relationship with the mothers of their children. “Gatekeeping” on the mothers’ part, both overt and subtle, is common. Although gatekeeping can take different forms, it broadly refers to beliefs and behaviors of mothers that inhibit fathers’ involvement in the lives of their children.

The descriptions presented here, it must be noted, are based solely on fathers’ accounts. There are always two sides (at least) to any story, and without the benefit of



interviewing the mothers, we are by definition presenting an incomplete and one-sided picture. That said, the intent of this study is to provide a faithful rendering of how fathers understand and perceive the world, including the role of mothers in shaping the nature and extent of fathers' involvement with their children. Bearing that caveat in mind, in this chapter we present key themes related to family formation and becoming a father, the tenor of romantic relationships and their dissolution, and the limits mothers impose on fathers' ongoing involvement in their children's lives.



### A. Becoming a father

Most men in this study first became fathers while still in their teens or early 20s. Both casual and longstanding relationships produced children. Many fathers had engaged in a lifestyle often called “running the streets”—having sex with multiple partners, partying, drinking and using drugs, and participating in illegal activities. According to these fathers, the young women who would become their children's mothers were sometimes involved in the same lifestyle, one in which the probability of unplanned pregnancies was high.

Regardless of whether either parent or both were deeply involved in a “fast” or “partying” lifestyle, men typically stumbled into fatherhood by accident or at least without intentional planning. Few fathers were in stable relationships when their children were conceived; even longer-term relationships were often characterized as “on again, off again.” For example, Franklin, a 49-year-old father of one child, explained that he and his daughter's mother:

... first hooked up my last year in high school. . . . We lived together for a little while and then we both went back home, her to her folks' house, me to mine, and we stopped messing around pretty much. She started seeing some guy on her job, so we kind of went our separate ways. . . . When she wasn't seeing the guy any more then she started calling up on me. . . . So now I'm in another relationship. . . . One night she called me over and she had some beer and got to drinking and one thing led to another and the next thing you know she's [pregnant].

Manuel, a 42-year-old father of two, said that his son “wasn't planned. . . . We weren't really using protection or nothing like that. We were doing what we were doing knowing that it was a possibility but we didn't expect it to happen like it did.”

Although rarely planned, some pregnancies were in the vein of “come what may”—not intentionally planned but also not altogether unexpected or unwelcome. Kurtis, a 31-year-old father of one, recounted how his son came to be: “I guess we were together . . . four years before [my son] came along. And I mean it wasn't really an accident . . . she was on birth control and I just told her get off of it. If it happens then it happens. And so we was prepared for it, but we didn't plan it.”

Even where the father was not in a stable relationship with the mother when an unplanned child was conceived, the couple often attempted to try to build, or rebuild, a relationship around the impending birth. For example, Ramon, a 29-year-old father of two explained, “At that time we were madly in love. Yeah, I mean her being pregnant and me taking her back and forth to see the doctor and everything it kind of drew us closer together. We became very, very close; we were like best friends.”

Most fathers had lived with the mothers of their children at least for some time.

As was true for Ramon, most fathers had lived with the mothers of their children at least for some time. According to the baseline survey, 87 percent of fathers in the qualitative study had lived with at least one of their children. This may be due in part to fathers moving to cohabitation quickly, sometimes within days or weeks of the beginning of a relationship with the mothers of their children. For example, Ervin, a 39-year-old father of one, described how he got together with the mother of his child: “She was walking home from school one day. It was raining. I told her I would give her a ride. We hooked up from there the next day. I went to go see her at her house. And then, a week later, I moved in with her.”

Latrelle, a 27-year-old father of one, also illustrated the quick pace at which cohabitation sometimes began: “I was dating this girl and we had got our own place in Apple Valley but the thing was we were only dating like three or four months before we moved in together. And it was . . . you know . . . like, ‘Whatever. Okay, let’s try it.’”

### **B. Relationships often marked by instability and conflict**

Instability and conflict permeated most of the relationships between fathers and their children’s mothers, sometimes beginning even before they had a child. The pressures of raising a child typically intensified existing couple conflict around other issues, particularly when one person continued to engage in a partying lifestyle while the other changed behavior to take on the responsibilities of parenting. Mistrust, especially surrounding issues of infidelity, verbal aggression, and physical violence were common in the large majority of these relationships and were often directly implicated in the couple’s breakup.

#### **Common elements of relationship instability: Mistrust and infidelity**

Mistrust permeated couples’ relationships and contributed to breakups. Having a child together sometimes changed the way the mother and father related to one another. For instance, Jamar, a 23-year-old father of one, said of his relationship after his daughter’s mother became pregnant, “I loved her. I trusted her. And I felt like we was going to go somewhere. She got pregnant, she changed.” Jamar noticed an increase in verbal aggression somewhere around the seventh month of the mother’s pregnancy. By the time the baby was born, her feelings for Jamar had changed to one of “hatred” and a few fights involving physical violence ensued.

Relationships were often marked by infidelity.

Relationships were often marked by infidelity (his, and sometimes hers), which fueled mistrust and contributed to the breakup. Like Jamar, Kurtis maintained that something changed between him and the mother of his child during her pregnancy and that the pressures of having a child escalated “the arguing and stuff.” Consequently, Kurtis said that he “actually went out and cheated a few times,” though recognized that he “shouldn’t have did that because of the arguing.”

Sometimes incarcerated fathers maintained relationships with their children’s mothers, but the enforced separation triggered fathers’ fears that their partner would not be faithful. Once these fears proved warranted, some fathers felt that it was impossible to rebuild mutual trust. For Tyrese, a 29-year-old father of three, “the ultimate strike” was when he was incarcerated and the mother of his three children started a relationship with “my homeboy,” adding, “We was like brothers.”

In a few cases, cheating on the part of the mother led a father to question whether the child was really his own. Manuel related such doubts:

You know, well at that certain time, she had other boyfriends. I know things that she was doing around 18 or 19, even though we were together since we were 14 on and off. I had other females, she had other males. . . . Later on in years I questioned [whether I was really the father] because me and her was going through a lot.

A few of these fathers avoided finding out if the child was theirs to prevent problems in the relationship.

### **Mothers’ behaviors and personal challenges contributed to relationship conflict and instability**

Men’s behavior—especially substance abuse, criminal behavior, and “anger problems”—were potent forces stressing relationships and eventually pulling couples apart. But some fathers suggested that the breakdown of relationships did not rest on their shoulders alone. Based on their own personal experiences, some said that the mothers’ unwillingness to adjust their lifestyles after becoming mothers—that is, by giving up “drinking and drugging” and “going out to the clubs”—caused couple conflict and sometimes led to breakups.

One 29-year-old father of two, Darwin, explained: “It was pretty serious, yeah. She was kind of wild. I don’t know. She still wanted to party and she was wrapped up in that life and that’s what ultimately [broke us up]. I had her clean for a while.” Similarly, Mark, a 30-year-old father of one child, said:

When she was pregnant and I found out she was going to be giving birth within nine months I went, straightened up, got a job, stopped the hustling life and got an apartment. Now, she moved in but she was never able to provide or keep a steady job because of her addiction.



According to the accounts by the fathers, many of the mothers of their children had experienced abuse and neglect, behavioral and mental health issues, struggles with addictions to alcohol or drugs, and unstable housing. Mitchell, a 32-year-old father of two, told a poignant story about Jeneice, his son's mother, in this regard:

Jeneice has some issues. . . . She has low self-esteem. She doesn't think anybody can love her. She doesn't think I truly care . . . and it sabotaged the relationship. . . . She figures all the men in her life left her. She has no father. She's been raped by a few men. She's been in violent relationships. So when she met me and I was not like this and I actually tried to uplift her. . . . She's white . . . . It gets nasty sometimes. She gets mad enough she'll call me a nigger.

When describing the mother of his only child, 30-year-old Kennedy recounted, "I think she has . . . bipolar issues and . . . yeah, she's just not really stable as far as even just keeping a place or keeping a job or just attitude issues."



### Intimate partner violence

Violence between partners permeated many relationships. The violence ranged from slapping, pushing, and/or hitting to more potentially lethal behaviors, such as assaults with weapons (e.g., stabbing). Forty percent of the fathers acknowledged they had experienced some kind of intimate partner violence, either as victims or perpetrators or both.

When fathers described themselves as the perpetrator, they often cited their exposure to witnessing physical and emotional abuse between their parents, immaturity, drug use, and anger management issues as causes. Patrick, a 45-year-old father of five, felt that his stepfather set an example that shaped how Patrick later thought he should behave in a relationship:

I grew up with my mother and [step]father . . . he drank and he abused my mother. So I didn't care about walking out on relationships or take responsibility for my children because I seen how my stepfather responded to my mother and when it came to me and how I respond to women.

"I didn't know how to really treat a woman because I saw the relationships my mom would be in."  
Zakary

Zakary, a 31-year-old father of three, said his mother's turbulent relationships took a toll on him as an adult. He explained, "I didn't know how to really treat a woman because I saw the relationships my mom would be in." Zakary, who was married to his first child's mother at the time the child was conceived, further reflected on his proclivity for violence during that earlier time in his life:

I got married when I was 19 [and I] was an extremely immature man. . . . I used to drink like a sailor. . . . I was just crazy. I'm talking about putting holes in the wall, just acting any kind of way. And she couldn't take it anymore. And at the time, I was so mad at her for leaving me. And it's like "How are you going to leave me? You're pregnant with my child," this and that. But I never sat back then and thought about like, "You were a danger not only to her but to yourself and the children." And I never thought about it like that until I got older. That's when I had regrets.

Some fathers claimed they were the victims, not the perpetrators, of violence in their relationships. Jayden, a 40-year-old father of one child, explained, "She could get violent and we would fight. She fights like a dude. She's only like 5'4" but it just became too much with the violence and all that." Some fathers claimed that even in instances where they did not initiate the violence, they often ended up being incarcerated as a result of incidents of domestic abuse.

Mutual violence seemed to be a typical characteristic of many relationships, according to fathers. Fathers characterized these relationships as marked by pushing, shoving, and slapping. According to some fathers, mothers would entice them into a fight by "throwing the first punch," provoking them to become violent as well. Mitchell explained that he would often end up in jail after an explosive fight with Jeneice, his child's mother. However, according to Mitchell, Jeneice's aggressive behavior toward him contributed to the escalation of violence:

She's been in a lot of violent relationships and she's used to that. So our relationship became violent and it's been violent a lot. . . .With [the last] altercation we had she attacked me, stabbed me and bit me.

Mitchell went on to explain—not without some resentment—that he ended up in jail every time their altercations got out of control, whereas she did not.

Fathers expressed distress over how their relationship got to the point where mutual violence was commonplace. Sometimes this violence eventually led fathers to walk

away from the relationship because the volatility was not healthy for the family. Malik, a 31-year-old father of two, described the reason his relationship dissolved:

There have been domestic issues where we've fought and stuff. I'm like, how did this happen? I didn't grow up in a household like this. I just got tired. I just left. I was going to anger management. How come I'm the one going to these classes, she should go in here, she needs some type of help. Why is it just me?

### Breakups and makeups

Multiple breakups and reunions, often with one or both partners pursuing other relationships in between, were common in men's relationships with their children's mothers. Some fathers cycled through breakups quickly, with reunions happening just as rapidly. Amos, a 34-year-old father of two, recounted:

Me and his [son's] mother been knowing each other since seventh grade. We wasn't together for three years, just messing around, then she got pregnant and a year later my son turned 1 and we decided to be together. We was together on and off for three years. Got engaged twice to her and the story tells itself now, we ain't together.

Mitchell also exemplifies this cyclical nature of relationships. Mitchell's relationship with the mother of his child was violent and he repeatedly ended up in jail because of the violence. He explained, "Our relationship was a constant cycle of makeup, breakup, I go to jail. Makeup, breakup, I go to jail. I was like, you know what, this is it." Ultimately, he broke the cycle by ending the relationship.

"Our relationship was a constant cycle of makeup, breakup, I go to jail."  
Mitchell

In general, breakups tended to be very adversarial. Several fathers claimed that in the aftermath of a breakup their partners sent angry and threatening emails and text messages, stalked them, threatened to follow them to their work site and jeopardize their jobs (a few apparently followed through on these threats), complained to their probation officers, or made false allegations of domestic violence to the authorities. Some fathers believed that their child's mother filed for a formal child support order, rather than continue with an informal agreement, out of spite. Some fathers also claimed that their child's mother had restricted access to their child in retaliation, particularly when the father had moved on to a new partner.

The instability, conflict, and mistrust that characterized fathers' relationships with the mothers of their children in most cases gave way to a permanent breakup. These highly conflictual breakups left deep scars—scars that, from the fathers' perspectives, marred a couple's ability to act cooperatively in the interest of their children.

### C. Everything goes through Mom: How mothers affected father involvement



Three out of four fathers in our study lived apart from all of their children, and another 12 percent lived apart from some but not all of their children. In most cases, the fathers were no longer in a romantic relationship with the mothers of their children. Yet the level of volatility in the relationship, and the degree of bitterness over the circumstances of the breakup, often contributed to ongoing strife that translated into a significant barrier to increased father involvement.

The current quality of the parents' relationship was often directly related to the father's level of access to his children. When relationships were positive, mothers and fathers were more likely able to negotiate access, and fathers felt supported in their efforts to be involved in their children's lives. Yet according to the baseline survey of fathers in the qualitative study, positive relationships were not very common. Only about a third of the fathers said they had an excellent or very good relationship with the mother of any of their children. Almost three out of four fathers said they had a poor relationship with the mother of at least one of their children.<sup>10</sup>

#### Positive co-parenting relationships promote greater father involvement

Positive co-parenting relationships, in which both parents actively work together to raise a child even though they are no longer married or in a romantic relationship, were uncommon but they did exist. Fathers in such relationships often gave their children's mothers high marks as parents, and praised them for their willingness to sacrifice for the children. For example, Emmett, a father of a 4-year old, praised the child's mother: "I can actually say [my daughter's] mom's a great mom though. She does a great job raising her." Likewise, DeShawn, a 47-year-old father of two, was effusive in his praise for his daughter's mother. "[My daughter's] mom will go without for her babies. She's a wonderful mother. I couldn't have asked for a better mother."

Feelings of mutual respect were also evident; not only did these fathers rate mothers' parenting skills highly, they often felt that the mothers truly valued having them involved in their children's lives. Those enjoying positive relationships with their children's mothers at present had generally not experienced the highly acrimonious breakups so endemic to the relationship narratives of most fathers in the study. For example, Everett, a 30-year-old divorced father of five, recounted:

*When we divorced, we weren't bickering or fighting. Today, we're still best of friends. There was never any of that because I told her "Whatever it is, we still have to do what we have to do for the kids. I don't want to be listening to you bad mouth me and I'm bad mouthing you because that's going to send bad signals." We always had that understanding.*

Likewise, DeShawn explained that he and his children’s mother “are the best of friends. I can call her, talk to her about problems that I’m having . . . and vice versa on her.” Like Everett, DeShawn also had a pact with his former partner not to “bad mouth” each other: “Even if we’re not on good terms [as a couple] she never talks bad to my daughter about me and I never downgrade my daughter’s mom. I never do that.”

### **Contentious relationships and maternal gatekeeping behaviors limited fathers’ access**

In our in-depth interviews, fathers were most likely to explain the degree to which they had access to their children in terms of their relationship with the mother of their child. Though the fathers in our study never used the word “gatekeeping” to refer to mothers’ behavior, we employ it to be consistent with the literature on father involvement. As noted earlier in this chapter, gatekeeping is defined as behavior that limits fathers’ engagement with their children. In some cases, gatekeeping may be justified or appropriate, for example, in the case of domestic violence or child abuse. Thus, our use of the term in this report is not intended to imply that mothers’ gatekeeping is always inappropriate.

More than half of nonresident fathers offered accounts of gatekeeping behavior, ranging from refusing to grant physical access to making frequent last-minute schedule changes. Gatekeeping also came in more indirect forms, such as refusal to communicate in person or by phone, withholding information from the father about the child, or berating the father.

The most severe form of gatekeeping, involved mothers who moved without leaving a forwarding address, changed their phone numbers, and cut off all other means of contact. Quincy, a 35-year-old father of four, had no idea where his youngest son, Kendell, lives—he just knew the mother moved to another city. He said that the only way he can see his son is if the mother decides, when it suits her schedule, to drop Kendell off to visit his maternal grandmother. Similarly, D’angelo, a 37-year-old father of two, had not seen his 10-year-old son in six years because the child’s mother moved away without leaving a forwarding address:

I don’t really know where she lives at. Yeah, she said I wasn’t never going to see him again, you know. Hopefully he can know that his daddy cared. I paid child support for him.

For J.T., a 48-year-old father of one, it had been over a year since he last saw his daughter, due to the mother cutting off all contact. He explained, “I don’t know where she is. [My daughter’s mother] cut me off, changed her number. I don’t know where they are.”

Fathers who had little to no contact with one or more of their children often strove to increase their involvement, whether in person or not. They reported placing repeated

phone calls to the child or the child's mother, texting, using Facebook, and less commonly Skype, or sending letters through the mail.

Brandon, a 24-year-old father, had been trying to no avail to contact the mother of his 5-year-old daughter, whom he had not seen in two years:

I been contacting her mama ever since she was born, you know, fighting to see her [his daughter], [to] be in her life, do what I got to do for her. And her mama . . . it's like what I say go in one ear and out the other. She don't want nothing to do with me either. . . . I saw my daughter one day at the Walmart. I bought her a little coloring book. That was the last time I saw [her].

Isaac, a 28-year-old father of two, saw his 5-year-old daughter at least every other weekend based on an informal arrangement with the child's mother. However, he had not seen his 9-year-old daughter since that child's mother "vanished" seven years ago. His efforts to locate them at the time of the interview had not been successful:

I've been reaching out to [my daughter's mother]. She ain't got no cell. She ain't on no social network. . . . I searched for her on Myspace, when Myspace was around a couple of years. I searched for her on Facebook. She ain't got no Twitter. No nothing. [I've been looking for] about seven years. Been a long time. They just vanished you know.

About 15 percent of fathers said they had no or very limited physical contact with one or more of their children due to an order of protection or a restraining order. These orders prohibited the father from being in the immediate vicinity of the mother, and in many cases, having any form of contact with her. Some orders had resulted from highly volatile relationships, which frequently included physical violence. In a few cases, according to the fathers, allegations of physical violence were false, made out of spite for the specific purpose of keeping men from their children. Willie, a 33-year-old father of three, for example, described his children's mother as:

. . . very spiteful. She's hateful. You know, maybe one day she'll grow up. . . . She play love, you know, oh, [and then she's like] "That's my baby, so you got no rights." She ran out and got a . . . protection order against me. For what, I don't know, because I don't argue with her, I don't call and bother her, you know, I ain't trying to jump on her or nothing like that. Basically [I] just left her alone . . . . She do everything in her power to try to hurt me. . . . The best thing a woman could do is use the system [against him].

Fathers with a felony conviction were particularly wary of taking any action that might be perceived as violating an order of protection or a restraining order, since this



also spelled a violation of probation or parole. Malik, a father of two on probation, described the following scenario:

That no-contact [order], that scares me because you don't know what can happen. Even though [we] aren't in a relationship anymore, even when I go around there she'll start up a fight and if I don't do what she says she's like, "I'm calling the police." That's going to make you leave and not come back for a while.

Stories of other, less severe forms of limiting physical access permeated our interviews with fathers. Some fathers said their children's mothers were erratic in their willingness to let them see their children. Kurtis, quoted earlier, said it was "a struggle" to see his son because doing so "depends on her" and "how she's really feeling." As a result, Kurtis had not been able to "see [his son] that often," at most "once or twice a month."

"Our big problem is she won't let me talk to my kids, or see my kids."

Dexter

Abrupt changes of plans, dodged phone calls, and ignored Facebook messages or texts were also common. Dexter, a 34-year-old father of six, told us:

As far as seeing [my daughter], [my children's mother] be saying "I'm a bit busy. I'll bring her by on Friday." Friday comes, she does not answer the phone. . . . You say you'll be there a certain time, but don't show up? That's what we're going through. This is the problem. . . . Our big problem is she won't let me talk to my kids, or see my kids [unless she feels like it].

Walker faced a similar situation with the mother of his son, Quincy:

[Quincy's mother] kind of plays games, like for instance, she be like, "Oh well we coming [into town] next week, I'm gonna bring Quincy you gonna see him next week." [I] come [to where we're supposed to meet], she not there. Say for instance it's a Saturday she won't answer the phone all Saturday or Sunday, I'll talk to her Monday and she be like "Oh, we couldn't come cause of this, that and the other." But this is like a weekly occurrence, like you would say yes but then something would come up. . . . It's always an excuse. She doesn't really wanna see me, you know? . . . I'm hoping we can get past that. I told her we can meet at police stations, we can meet at malls, . . . anyway you wanna set it up, just let me see y'all . . . . I wanna see my son, you know what I'm saying?

Several fathers who reported complying with formal child support orders claimed that their children's mothers would sometimes restrict access when a father failed to provide "extras" over and above the required child support—for rent, utilities, clothing, school trips, and the like. These fathers complained that they struggled just to keep up with child support, and could not meet these additional demands.

Kemal, a 28-year-old father of one, was in this situation. “She will say things like ‘If you are not buying her any clothes for school you can’t see her. . . .’ I can’t do child support, medical expenses and buy her clothes.” Jamar claimed that the mother of his daughter kept increasing the amount she expected over and above what he paid on his formal child support order. Jamar reported paying \$300 every month in child support, but was often denied access to his daughter. He claimed that she constantly demanded that he “pay this” and “pay that,” but that he “ain’t got no money to pay” for these extra items.

Beyond limiting physical access, mothers act as gatekeepers in more indirect ways. In some particularly acrimonious relationships, mothers refuse to communicate, or fail to share important information about the child with the father. For example, Marquis, a 28-year-old father of one, saw his child regularly, yet the child’s mother, Jasmine, blocked Marquis’ number on her phone. Marquis said he tried to communicate with Jasmine about their daughter through Facebook and email but that she did not respond to his messages.



Leroy, a 19-year-old father of one, felt he could not really be a father given the limited amount of information his child’s mother was willing to share:

She doesn’t really tell me anything. She leaves me out in the dark about literally everything—doctors and all, medical and dental, all that crap for him. 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.

Worse still, fathers claimed, was when their child’s mother derides them, sometimes in the presence of their children. According to fathers, verbal abuse from their children’s mothers was common, and often harsh. For example, Blaine said that any time he would



call his children's mother she would "belittle me or make me feel like nothing or make me feel miserable in some kind of way." He recalled how his children's mother told him that he is "nothing," a "coward," and would say to him "I'm gonna find them [the kids] a new daddy." Blaine explained "I know how it is to be treated like dirt." Phone calls in particular offered opportunities for mothers to berate fathers for misdeeds like a missed visit, but sometimes for no apparent reason as far the father could ascertain.

### **Fathers' views about why mothers restrict access to their children**

Most fathers attributed mothers' gatekeeping behavior to the mothers' desire to punish the fathers for past misdeeds, including breaking off the relationship. As Marquis, put it, "It just basically has a lot to do with when a woman is bitter or scorned. We're not going to get back together so you want to hold that against me." Similarly, Dexter claimed, "She's doing it on purpose because she always told me when we broke up, 'I'll make your life a living hell. I know what to do to you.' . . . She knows the only [way to get] to me is to take my kids . . . my children is my weakness." Preston, a father of four, had not seen his 1-year-old in over six months when interviewed. He explained, "I don't see my baby because really, her mom and I have issues. I'm really upset about that. . . . I want to be there for [my daughter]. I missed her first birthday, that kind of sucks. I feel bad but I feel it's not even my fault."

In some cases, fathers believed that mothers intended to drive them from their children's lives. Diondre, a 34-year-old father of two, explained that the mother of one of his children had made repeated allegations of child abuse, which he flatly denied. The experience of "being in and out of court so much" was so painful that he thought about simply walking away from his relationship with his son:

With [my son's mother] she uses my son to try to get back at me for not wanting to be with her and makes all of these false lies and stuff. I've been in and out of court so much with her. . . . She's saying that I'm putting my hands on my son, I touch my son, try to molest my son, [do] all kinds of things to my son. It's been . . . so much going back and forth to court that it's been like, I'm ready to give up and sign away my rights just to stop dealing with [this]. But at the same time . . . I don't want to give up on my child.

Blaine, a 29-year-old father of two, expressed a common sentiment when he claimed that his son's mother used his son as a "weapon" to hurt him:

She's caught up in her feelings. She hates me. She spites me. She takes my son away and does all this stuff to hurt me and it's not right. You shouldn't use a child as a weapon or a game to play, you know? That's your son, you know. That's your child. It's not right and that's what a lot of women are doing nowadays and it's really putting a toll on children around the world. . . .

Fathers were deeply frustrated by their lack of access to their children.

Overall, many fathers were deeply frustrated by their lack of access to their children. It was common for these fathers to express feeling hurt, angry, resentful, and generally worn down by what they viewed as unfair and verbally abusive behavior on the part of the mothers. Some felt they had reached a dead end in their dealings with the mothers. Changing the dynamic of these relationships in order to increase fathers' involvement and co-parent more effectively was an ongoing challenge.

## Conclusion

Men in this study often reported that they had children as a result of unplanned pregnancies, and their children were often born into relationships riddled by conflict or a lack of commitment. Mistrust, infidelity, outbursts of violence, and the personal challenges faced by one or both parents continually undermined the emotional bond between them—or, in the event of a breakup, the promise of putting differences aside in order to co-parent effectively. Things usually ended badly. And in the aftermath, men reported often finding themselves at the mercy of their children's mothers and, from their perspective, blocked from being fathers, at least in any meaningful sense. This exclusion is connected to and heightened by men's own struggles with employment and housing, the stigma of a criminal record, and the need to meet child support obligations. These interconnected barriers are the subject of the next chapter.

## VI. “LIFE’S HARD” – FATHERS’ INTERWOVEN PERSONAL CHALLENGES



The challenges faced by fathers in our study, both past and present, were formidable. Most struggled to make ends meet and find work, ideally a steady full-time job, that provided some measure of economic security. Being arrested or serving time in prison was often both a consequence and a cause of other troubles in men’s lives. Beyond creating physical separation from partners and children, which often had a profound impact on these relationships, the experience of incarceration caused significant problems for fathers related to employment, child support, and housing.

Confronted by the day-to-day reality of economic insecurity, fathers struggled to make ends meet so that they could take care of their basic needs while still meeting the financial needs of their children. The kinds of jobs for which they might be qualified were scarce and paid low wages. Moreover, as fathers repeatedly pointed out, employers’ unwillingness to hire a felon often became yet another seemingly insurmountable obstacle to employment, even for the most menial jobs.

To add to these challenges, over half of these fathers were unstably housed. The combination of a lack of resources and the mark of a criminal record made securing a lease in one’s own name exceptionally difficult for the fathers in this study. Fathers’ unstable housing situations also made it more difficult for them to see and spend time with their children.

Child support also loomed large in the lives of many of these fathers—because of the significant financial burden it often imposed and the enforcement actions levied on fathers who fell behind on payments. Fathers’ child support challenges were compounded for some men by incarceration, because they often accumulated arrears while serving sentences and left prison even further in debt.

Fully half of the fathers discussed struggling with alcohol or substance abuse in the past, though most claimed they had—or were trying to—put their addiction behind them. Few had been formally diagnosed with a serious mental health problem such as bipolar disorder, but one in three discussed in more general terms past and present depression, emotional instability, or mental distress. Along with depression, manifestations of behavioral and mental health problems included bouts of anger and violent behavior.

This chapter describes fathers' experiences with these key life challenges. While any of these challenges would be difficult to navigate and overcome, the ability to do so was further complicated by how they were often overlapping and interrelated, with one compounding the other. The interrelated nature of these challenges is highlighted in the stories of Manuel and Levi (see the boxes later in this chapter).



### **A. Economic hardship: Struggling to get by**

Fathers in the qualitative study struggled to maintain employment and make ends meet. According to the baseline survey, almost three out of four fathers in the qualitative study were either unemployed or made \$500 or less in the past month. In-depth interviews with fathers confirmed that economic conditions for most fathers were at the very least extremely challenging and even dire for some. Although these fathers faced a myriad of challenges, the most commonly cited barrier to employment was fathers' past incarceration. Even working fathers in the study struggled to get by financially because of low wages, temporary work, and limited hours. As a result, fathers relied on a variety of strategies to provide and supplement their income, including side jobs and help from family and friends.

## Looking for a job, saddled with a criminal record, and coming up with nothing

Though virtually all of the fathers in our study were eager to work full time throughout the year, almost half of fathers had no job at all at the time we interviewed them. Over one-third of all fathers in the qualitative study had been out of work for six months or more, according to the baseline survey. Against the backdrop of a still sluggish economic recovery and tight labor market, fathers identified an additional key barrier to securing employment: a felony record. When talking about their lack of success in obtaining employment, fathers typically did not focus on their lack of educational attainment, skills or employment history as factors that contributed to their difficulties finding employment.

"I was making real good money when I went to jail; I had a decent job; good medical but now that I got out, I got a felony. Can't find decent work."

Charles

It is well known that a criminal record, and particularly a felony conviction, is associated with struggles finding employment, and the fathers in this study are no exception. Nearly 8 out of 10 fathers in this qualitative study had been convicted of a crime (i.e. any type of crime, including but not limited to felonies) and even more had arrest records, according to the baseline survey. Fifty-four-year-old Charles, a father of one, told us:

See, I was making real good money when I went to jail; I had a decent job; good medical but now that I got out, I got a felony. Can't find decent work. Everybody wants to hire me for minimum wage. What, just 'cause I made a mistake . . . ? Minimum wage is less than half of what I made; I can't function on that.

Similarly, Kelvin, a 36-year-old father of seven, related the following situation: "I have a second-degree aggravated assault. . . . It is 15 years old but it could sometimes pose a kind of a negative impact on getting employment, you know? Because people are like, 'Oh, is he going to come in here and go postal? Is he going to beat somebody up?'" Even low-wage, unskilled positions could be hard for fathers to get in the wake of a felony conviction, as Walker, a 32-year-old father of one, found out:

Yeah, when I came out [of prison] I was struggling hard to find a job. People like "Oh, you could always go to McDonald's." I got turned down by multiple McDonald's. What was a defining thing in my head was when I got turned down by Family Dollar. I had stock clerk experience from Shop 'N Save, from Famous [Footwear] and from Schnuck's [grocery store]. So, I go into a Family Dollar one day, they so understaffed they got boxes on the floor, like customers can't even get through the aisle 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."

Probation and parole conditions also limited the types of work opportunities available to these fathers. Solomon, an unemployed 21-year-old father of one, had a construction

job before going to prison that involved travel out of the state, but now that he is on probation, “if I want to go out of town and work I got to get a pass and sometimes they don’t give me passes.”

### Found a job but I still can’t pay the bills

A job alone, however, didn’t solve most fathers’ economic woes. Though very low wages were common, this problem was exacerbated by job instability and the struggle to secure sufficient hours. The baseline survey showed that employed fathers in the qualitative study mostly worked in low-wage jobs, with just under three-fourths of working fathers making \$1,000 or less per month before taxes. Based on our interviews with fathers about their current employment, the most common types of jobs currently or recently held were food service, construction, maintenance or landscaping, and warehouse work.

Temporary work is, by definition, unstable, and nearly a third of working fathers in our study were employed through temporary (“temp”) employment agencies or engaged in seasonal work. Acknowledging that some work was better than no work, Dexter, a 34-year-old father of six, discussed the challenge of unstable hours and unpredictable job schedules that made it impossible to know how much pay he might bring home in any given week and undermined his ability to pay child support:

[The temporary agency] will send you out to work but you might not be at [the same] place the next day. You might not have any work the next day. It’s a temp . . . It can change any time. I may work two days, and not the rest of the week.

Not being able to secure, or count on, a sufficient number of hours on a regular basis contributed to the fragility of economic circumstances among those fathers who were lucky enough to find employment. For example, Kelvin works part-time in food service for \$11 an hour and is among the better off fathers interviewed for this study, but he told us, “My paycheck yesterday was \$395. You know what I mean? And that’s for two weeks for, I think, maybe 60 something hours. So I’m not even making 40 hours, barely making 35 hours a week. This week coming up I won’t make 35 hours. I’ll make maybe 28 hours.”

“My paycheck yesterday was \$395. . . . And that’s for two weeks for, I think, maybe 60 something hours. So I’m not even making 40 hours, barely making 35 hours a week.”

Kelvin

### Caught between a rock and a hard place: Not at work, but working to get by

Given the high level of unemployment among these fathers and their meager incomes, fathers had to rely on a variety of strategies to get by. Kolby, who is 39 and has six children, described how he panhandles when he needs cash: “I’ve got my own little hustle now. . . . I go out to nice areas . . . and I’ve been doing pretty good. It’s what’s kept me out of trouble. It’s kept my head above water.” Other fathers leaned on family and friends for support. Willie, who is 33 and the father of three, said he gets by on “support from my family and friends.” Mark, a 30-year-old father of one, explained, “I go to my family for food and shelter. Most of them are kind enough to offer me food, not so much shelter. But when I can get it, I take it.”



Despite the instability of fathers' financial situation, only about one-quarter talked about receiving some form of government assistance. These fathers received SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits, SSI/SSDI (Supplemental Security Income/Social Security Disability Insurance), general assistance, and unemployment insurance. But even fathers receiving some form of government assistance still had to string together whatever they could. For example, Mitchell, a father of two with a large child support debt said, "They give me \$200 a month [in general assistance] but other than that, I hustle any way I can."

Faced with a lack of cash resources, these fathers had to rely on a variety of strategies to get by. More than one-third of fathers relied sporadically on side jobs to make ends meet, including home repair, car maintenance, and landscaping. One father, Juan, a 50-year-old with one child, balanced three part-time jobs and took advantage of side jobs. He explained, "I was doing just so much just to get that four, five hundred, six hundred dollars a week just to stay above."

A few fathers relied heavily on these side jobs to meet their basic needs. Levi, a 39-year-old father of three, explained the importance of his side job selling DVDs on the streets: "I have to, every day depends on me eating off of what I do." He also told us that the money from this side job "goes so fast I don't get to see it too much" (see the box on the next page for more of Levi's life story).

Fathers sometimes learned about side jobs from family and friends, or found opportunities for odd jobs from their neighbors. Quentin, a 30-year-old father of two, talked about a side job he picked up when his work for a temporary agency slowed down: "I'm getting by the best way I can. . . . I've been working with my big brother on the landscaping job . . . the guy was only using me two to three times a week, but he was paying cash."

## **B. Child support challenges**

Although fathers talked about the importance of providing financially for their children, unemployment and economic instability made it difficult to meet this responsibility. Indeed, some fathers described their inability to financially provide as the toughest part of fatherhood. According to the baseline survey, more than half of the fathers (58 percent) had a child support order. Among fathers with a child support order, 54 percent did not pay any child support in the past month; most of these fathers also reported that they had no earnings in the prior month. In this section we describe how child support contributed to fathers' economic instability, the challenge of child support debt, and the consequences of child support enforcement actions.



A resounding theme among many fathers with child support orders was how their child support obligations outstripped their capacity to pay. In their eyes, the system was set up so that they could never get ahead. Nick, a 26-year-old father of one, working a temporary job unloading trucks for a linen company reported that he had an order of \$739 per month and arrears of more than \$17,000. He asked, “If I’m not making anything and child support is taking everything, how can I pay for rent? How can I take care of my personal needs? . . . How can I live? That’s what makes it hard.” He went on to add, “I’m not saying that I don’t want to pay child support, but I don’t think it should be this high an amount.”

### **Levi’s story: “You can’t see the top no more”**

Levi, a 39-year-old African American father of three, was raised by his mother and grandmother, who both worked to provide for him as a child. He recalled that they were always caught up on their bills and “wasn’t nothing due or something getting taken or turned off; we was always on time.” He never met his father and did not have a good relationship with his stepfather, who left one day and never returned. Levi recalled that his stepfather “physically assaulted” his mother, but his family “kept it away from me” because Levi “was out there on the streets” and, if he had known, was well-situated to “have went and did something about that.”

Levi’s first child was born while he was on the streets and selling drugs. He eventually settled down and had a second child with his girlfriend 10 years later. After he began drifting apart from her, he initiated a relationship with another woman. When he was 32, this on again, off again relationship produced another son. The first mother, Sandra, does not allow him to spend time with his children. He argues quite a bit with Sandra and describes her as “very uncooperative with me, to the point that I think I’m going to have to get the law involved and actually suggest visits.”

Levi’s relationship with Tanya, the mother of his two youngest children, “is the complete opposite” of his relationship with Sandra. Tanya wants Levi to “do everything with [his son].” Although Tanya allows him to spend time with their son, some of her older children discourage their relationship because of his job situation and homelessness. He is currently struggling to get by—in addition to being homeless, he lost his car because he couldn’t keep up with the payments, he got sick and caught pneumonia recently, and he has struggled to find a job and sells DVDs just to have enough to eat. Levi explained that he has stalled in his life: “I have not grown. The only thing I’ve done a lot of is just sell movies. Right now my life isn’t looking too good, it’s going downhill. All the good jobs is not on the bus line and that’s just it. Life’s hard.”

Levi spoke extensively of the economic hardship he faces because of child support. He owes over \$8,000 in arrears and his wages are withheld to the point that he doesn’t see the merits in working. He struggles at every turn and calls child support “uninspiring,” and adds that “whatever I produce I give up. I try to be the best dad I can, afford the best things that I can, even at the sacrifice of myself.” He thought he would be a lot further along in his life but “can’t complain about it now, it’s already done.” He continues to “pray and hope things change” and he has become “tired of being at the bottom so long that you can’t see the top no more.”

"I can't afford to live and pay this amount of child support."

Quincy

Quincy, an employed 35-year-old father of four, said he owes \$800 a month in child support. He explained the impact on his budget as follows: "I can't afford to live and pay this amount of child support." A 27-year-old father of four, Rashaad, describes his situation similarly. "I got to work so hard to be left with nothing. It's hard, man. Child support eating me. I got to work because if I don't work, I ain't got no money. But I'm still working to not have money."

Malik, a 31-year-old father of two, was unemployed at the time of our interview and living in transitional housing. He described how he wasn't better off financially when he worked two jobs because:

Child support was just taking everything to where I couldn't even survive. . . . I'd work one job in the morning, get off, be off for two hours, go to the next job, wasn't off until 4:00 AM, then be off for a couple hours to go back to the first job. I wasn't getting anything to survive; I couldn't even get a hotel room if I wanted to.

Those paying down past child support arrears, such as Everett, a 51-year-old father of five, felt that they were "basically working for child support." Approximately two-thirds of these fathers with child support orders said they owed back child support in amounts ranging from \$1,000 to over \$100,000. Although these fathers did not always know exactly how much they were in arrears, they viewed their child support debt as one more reason why the odds of getting ahead financially were stacked against them.

Some fathers who had been incarcerated were particularly frustrated that their child support obligations continued while they were in prison. Taylor, a 38-year-old father of seven, felt his hands were unfairly tied as his child support debt "kept building" during the 10 years he was incarcerated: "I'm like how is you [trying to make me pay] when . . . I'm incarcerated, I'm not even making nothing. Give me the opportunity. I mean, I would love to take care of my children but I can't do nothing in jail."

DeShawn, a 47-year-old father of two children by two mothers, explained that he understood that "every man who takes the responsibility to lay down and have unprotected sex with a woman and brings about a child, they're supposed to take care of their responsibility." At the same time, DeShawn questioned how it was possible for him to support himself, keep up with his monthly child support payments, and pay on his arrears that had accumulated when he was incarcerated:

If a male is incarcerated and the child support doesn't stop . . . then when you come out, if you go to these people and say, "Hey, I just got released. I'm x amount of dollars in arrears. I can only pay you \$20, \$25 a week . . . they're going to say no. They're going to lock you back up if you're too far in arrears. . . . Instead of locking them up, give them a job.

Mitchell estimated that he owed about \$20,000 in arrears. He described the difficulty involved with getting an order modified downward while incarcerated:

The only time I ever get in contact with them [the child support system] is when I'm in jail. They'll send me some papers and tell me my bill. Then I send them some papers to try to modify it. Like I'm in jail. There's no way I can pay you this \$160 a week. And they just don't send me nothing back and then the bill just continues. . . .

Dexter, who had multiple child support orders, explained the dilemma facing marginally employed men—especially those with prison time and felony records—who get increasingly caught up by the consequences of failing to meet their child support obligations:

After child support is done, [I have only] \$170. Now how am I supposed to pay rent? How am I supposed to live? How am I supposed to eat? How am I supposed to buy clothes, deodorant, soap? How am I supposed to get out here to stay clean enough to find a job, work, buy bus passes, stuff like that, how am I supposed to do that? They're throwing felonies on us. They're locking us up. They're taking all of our money for child support but they're not even investigating these women. Nine times out of 10, the women are not even letting us see the kids at all.

Child support did more than hit the wallet hard. Fathers' jobs were sometimes threatened or lost as a result of having their drivers' licenses suspended for falling behind in their child support, being required to appear in court over a late or missed payment, and, in a few cases, jailed for nonpayment of child support. For example, D'angelo, who is 37 years old, has two children, and was temporarily employed at the time of his interview, explained:

I just went on my birthday to try to renew my license and they said they can't do it. I've called them and never can get through to [the child support agency]. . . . Never gave me any type of information. It's a stone wall, a brick wall every time I call.

Darvin is a 29-year-old father with two children who owes \$489 a month in child support. He decided to purchase items for his two sons rather than pay through the formal system, but he paid a steep price for this choice:

So I just spent the last of my money buying my son stuff . . . and [the child support system] still going to come after me and take my license? Now I got to drive with no license? . . . So I'm driving anyways. I got to drive. I've got to . . . go find a [job] interview. If I get pulled over that's a \$280 fine, another tack on my driving record. It's just crazy.

Hareem, a 39-year-old father of 7, shared his experience with incarceration for nonpayment:

I went in front of the judge before. . . . He seen I'm working and [asked], "Do you have anything to pay now?" "No, I don't, sir." "Well, we going to continue until two weeks from now." But I'm still sitting in jail [all that time]. Now I done lost my job . . . and now I'm still sitting in jail because I didn't pay you all this week because I was in jail. You know?

In addition to providing financial support through formal child support obligations, some fathers also provided informal support. Some mothers did not seek assistance from the formal child support system and relied on fathers to provide informal support—cash or help paying bills. Some fathers tried to supplement whatever they paid through the formal child support system with additional support (for example, money for diapers, clothes, food, school supplies).

"I don't think that's right. If an order is to be paid [then] visitation should be right behind that. But it's not. . . How's that? It blows my mind that you want me to pay child support for a child that I don't see."  
Andre

Fathers who were paying on formal support orders did not always have access to the children they were financially supporting. Andre, a 34-year-old father of six, was supporting his daughter informally while he and the mother were in a relationship. When the relationship with the mother dissolved, however, she obtained a formal order and then denied him access to his daughter:

I told [my daughter's mother] she didn't have to hit me for child support. I do my part. She like whatever. I'm going to hit you with child support. So the child support order came in and it's \$50 a month. But she won't even let me see her. So I say these courts want me to pay \$50 a month for a child that I can't even see. . . I don't think that's right. If an order is to be paid [then] visitation should be right behind that. But it's not. It's like you pay this and we don't care if you see her or not. How's that? It blows my mind that you want me to pay child support for a child that I don't see.

### C. Unstable housing

Finding a stable and secure place to live was a struggle for many men. Living rent-free with family and friends (either moving in or "couch surfing" from place to place), living in a shelter, or living on the streets were all common among men in this study. In addition, according to the baseline survey, over half of the men also said they did not expect to stay in their current housing situation the next year.

Having a criminal record made finding housing even more difficult. On top of low wages and the lack of steady income, the mark of a criminal record made finding housing and securing a lease in one's own name exceptionally difficult for many fathers in this study. Fathers' housing instability had consequences for their involvement with

their children, as it was difficult to find a safe place where they could take their children and enjoy time together. Several fathers said they saw their children less frequently when they had no consistent or safe place to stay. The box on the next page describes how Manuel's housing instability was closely related to the other challenges he faced.

### Multiple housing strategies

Fathers who could not find or afford housing often struggled to have a roof over their heads. Doubling up, living in shelters, and living in vacant homes or on the streets often had to suffice when men could not secure stable housing. For some fathers, bouncing around from place to place was a continuation of the pattern of unstable living arrangements going back to their childhoods and youth. Sometimes a father moved in with his current partner because he was homeless or unstably housed. For those currently in a romantic relationship, the couple usually moved in with the woman's parents, with other relatives, or with friends, or the man moved into the woman's apartment.

**Doubling up.** Many fathers who lived with family or friends—either moving in or couch surfing—did so because they could not afford an apartment of their own. For example, Marcus, a 36-year-old father of two, lived with his aunts while struggling to secure a housing subsidy. “So, I live with my aunties. All the time I've been trying to get my own, I've been trying to get on Section 8 . . . it seems like I can't get none of that because I didn't have no name on my birth certificate and by me being on probation and stuff like that. . . .”

**Living with family and friends.** Living with family and friends could also present challenges for fathers' attempts to parent and be involved with their children. For example, Antwon, a 46-year-old father of seven who is doubled up with his brother's family, told us that he and his kids “need our own space” because the two families have different parenting rules and expectations, and there are “certain things [his brother's family] might not accept in his house [that] I might accept in mine.” Another father, Vincent, 23 years old, did not bring his son over to his current partner's house, where he recently moved, because she did not like him. Although he hoped to move into his own place, he noted, “I don't have a job so I wouldn't have anywhere to move.” Ervin, 39 years old, lives with his mother in her subsidized housing unit but said it is not safe for his 14-year-old daughter: “It's gangs, shootings happen over there. It's wild. . . . You see prostitutes and all that stuff. . . . It's a high rise and it's dangerous in there.”

However, for some fathers, the ability to live with a family member or friend also provided a place where they could spend time with their children. Cedric, a 30-year-old father of two, lives with his mother, and his children visit there every other weekend. Izaiah, a 29 year-old-father who lives with three family friends, said that their place is good for spending time with his children because “they knew my mom, dad, they're friends of the family for years.” When fathers lived with family members, it provided an opportunity for their children to spend time with their extended family

### **Manuel's story: "Needing a place to lay my head"**

Manuel, a 42-year-old African American father of two, describes his childhood as "very rough." He bounced between his extended family, an aunt, and grandmother, who were trying to care for him while his mother was incarcerated and his father raised another family. Manuel recalls "the streets, [and] all the guys in the gangs" as important father figures in his life. At the age of 15, this gang activity and "street life" landed him in a home for boys, an alternative to jail, the first act of what turned out to be continued interaction with the criminal justice system as an adult.

Manuel's teenage girlfriend became pregnant, and Manuel became a father at 18. Soon after his son turned 1, Manuel was incarcerated for domestic assault. He and his girlfriend would get into "altercations" that were "sometimes physical," but "back then we didn't look at it like that." That relationship ended and Manuel did not see his oldest son for over 10 years. His son, now 20, was recently released from prison and reunited with Manuel, who is trying to build a relationship with him. Like Manuel, his son is homeless and "couch-surfs" to get by. Manuel married his youngest son's mother in 2006, but was charged with domestic assault against her and consequently went to jail. He hasn't seen his 6-year-old son since the child was two.

Manuel's early troubles came back to haunt him in his adult life when he lost his McDonald's job. He was terminated after management did "a sweep through McDonald's" conducting background checks, which brought up his gun case from "gang banging" along with domestic charges.

Unable to find work or a steady income, Manuel said he has never "had a place where my name was actually on the lease" or a "place to call my own." He is currently "house-sitting" for an acquaintance in a dilapidated apartment with no running water. Housing, just as in his youth, is a struggle. Manuel illustrated the circular nature of his housing problem: "I want to work, but I want to secure my housing so when I get off of work I have some place to lay my head. A place to lay my head so I can get that rest I need to go to work." Even when he does work, his child support order, and \$10,000 in arrears, leave him nearly destitute when he gets paid: "Child support hitting my checks up . . . taking a chunk out. Not leaving me with enough to even make it."

Despite these multiple challenges throughout his lifetime—homelessness, unemployment, a felony history—Manuel keeps moving forward, searching for work, and continuing to pursue an associate's degree in small business management in the hope of getting "in the door" or "get[ting] a chance somewhere." He has reframed his incarceration experiences as ones he can learn from, saying, "When you go through incarceration or certain things, it might be to save your life. It might be the break that you need to sit down and stop doing whatever you were doing in order to make it." He also felt that being homeless has led him to be more humble and sympathetic toward others enduring the same circumstances. Manuel compares his current self to his younger self: "I think my soul is a lot kinder than it was then. I'm always trying to do something positive now."



as well as their father. For example, Tyrese, a 29-year-old father of three who lives with his mother, explained that “I just let [my kids] have their fun with their granny being there. . . . They have more fun over there with us than they would anywhere.”

**Shelters and living on the streets.** Shelters were generally the housing option of last resort, sometimes considered even worse than living on the streets. Jason, 23 years old, said he preferred sleeping outside to staying in a shelter because “my stuff got stolen every time I went to the shelter. Clothes, food, cell phone. So I just slept outside.” Jamar, a 23-year-old, also described an earlier period in his youth when he was “out on the street sleeping in vacant houses and stuff” to avoid staying in a shelter. Homelessness also constrained or prevented fathers from seeing their children. Malik, for example, did not see his children for four months while he was homeless; he explained, “I didn’t want to see my kids until I was together because I was just staying in my car.”



Mark described knitting together a variety of options and trying to obtain subsidized housing:

I kind of bounce around to where I feel safe. I’ve got . . . three different places where I can lay my head at night. They’re not all always safe, depending on who’s there or the length of time that I’m there. . . . I just put in an application . . . for Section 8, so that eventually I can have a place and then my son can come.

Fathers who lived in a shelter or other group settings, such as a residential treatment program, also had to arrange another place to visit with their children. Duane, a 41-year-old father of six, explained how staying in a shelter restricted the time he spent with his children:



It's a men's shelter. They [his children] can't come over there. . . . They be like, oh daddy, where are you? When are we going to come your house. . . . Because when I had my place . . . they always come spend the weekend with me. We cook together and the little girls help me in the kitchen. . . . They like that. But, until I get my place, it is what it is.

### **Criminal record is a barrier to securing housing**

A criminal record clearly hurts employment prospects, but it can also make it hard to find housing. A criminal record can make securing a lease difficult, and make it impossible to qualify for subsidized housing—a theme that emerged in the narratives of fathers in this study. For example, Brandon, a 24-year-old, said he had ended up homeless because the landlords he approached were unwilling to rent to a felon:

Like as far as me being homeless, [it came from] not finding an apartment because of the [felony conviction]. [Even though I have a job now] I feel like I got one foot in and one foot out [of making it] because I still don't got my own apartment.

A felony conviction can also render one ineligible for public housing. It can make it impossible to move in with a partner or parent who lives in public housing, even if invited to do so. Not only does this policy further limit fathers' stable housing options, it also can limit their opportunity to spend time with their children. Dan, a 31-year-old father who has two children living with his mother in public housing, said:

I'm not exactly allowed to live in that apartment complex because it's government ran housing and I have these felony issues. I look like a bad guy so . . . I'm on a property ban list. So I . . . sneak in every, every night and go see her [his daughter] after the [security guard] leaves. . . . I just go up there and . . . see my daughter and just stay kind of quiet. . . .

### **D. Additional impacts of incarceration and court involvement**

Arrests for minor offenses could wreak havoc in fathers' lives, and create a cycle of negative effects.

Convictions and incarceration took a heavy toll on fathers' lives beyond the drag they put on employment opportunities, housing options, and efforts to get out of debt. Arrests for even minor offenses could have negative effects on fathers' lives and on their involvement in the lives of their children.

#### **The heavy price of even simple brushes with the law**

Arrests for minor offenses, described as common, could wreak havoc in fathers' lives, and create a cycle of negative effects. As illustrated in the experiences of Malik, Blaine, and Amos, described below, infractions such as failure to pay child support, unpaid parking tickets, or warrants that had not been cleared could lead to jail time, which in turn often resulted in job loss, additional debt, and increased economic insecurity.

Malik reported being arrested for breaking a no-contact order with his partner after she invited him out for a drink to try to reconcile their past differences. Malik said:

We had a drink, on our way coming back home. The police pulled us over because her tail light was out. Once they ran my name, they took me back to jail again that same night. I was in jail for two weeks. I got out and my job was gone, another felony charge just for contact. Just for being in her presence. I'm like, wow. . . .

Blaine, a 29-year-old father of two, described spending several days in jail for failing to pay his parking tickets:

Went home, parked my car, next thing I know, the police is knocking on my door for parking tickets so I get locked up. No way to contact [my child's] school. Everything just . . . it was horrible, horrible. I was locked up for like four or five days. Then my car got repo'd [repossessed]. Didn't have a job; my car got repo'd.

Amos, a 34-year-old father of two, missed the birth of his son because his friend got pulled over while driving him to the hospital, and he had an outstanding warrant that should have been cleared already. Amos told us:

We get pulled over, my friend gets pulled over, he's talking mess and he has a warrant and because he's talking mess, they asked me for my ID and I had a warrant for something I had already took care of and they never cleared the warrant, like a ticket, they never cleared the warrant so I had to go to jail on my way to go see [my son be born].

Incarceration took a heavy toll on fathers' ability to be part of their children's lives.

### Impact of incarceration on father involvement

Incarceration took a heavy toll on fathers' ability to be part of their children's lives. Periods of incarceration caused some fathers to miss the birth of their children. When fathers had to serve long sentences, their children grew up without fathers in their lives. Kemal, a 28-year-old father of one, said:

I recently was released from prison two years ago. I did eight and a half years. My daughter was born during [this] time . . . so I never had a personal experience with her being out [of prison], it was all from visitation.

Taylor spent seven years in jail on a gun charge and laments not "actually being there for the first bike ride" of four of his children. Devonte, a 46-year-old father of four, remembered what it was like interacting with his children during visitation:

It was just kind of hard to talk to them through glass, especially with [my youngest daughter]. Like I said she was two years old and she was trying to reach through the glass to hug me. That stuff hurts. . . . Because I wanted to hug her too, like that's my baby.

Sometimes fathers lost touch with their children altogether because of incarceration. Manuel, a 42-year-old father of two, lost touch with his older son because “right after he was born I got incarcerated.” Manuel served about five years, but “didn’t glance” at his son until more than a decade later. Omari, a 35-year-old father of three, went to prison for “11 years, three months and 21 days” right after conceiving his first child, a son, whom he has never met. Because of other stints in prison, he’s disconnected from his other children as well:

I haven’t seen my kids and haven’t seen my firstborn. He’s 18 and I never seen him, haven’t seen my daughter in four years. I got a son that’s four, I haven’t seen him but once. She [the child’s mother] brought him up to see me in federal prison but I hadn’t ever really got a chance to see him because I’m always in situations.

A father’s incarceration could also cause strife with his children. Patrick, a 45-year-old father of five, reflected on the impact of his incarceration on his children: “Well, I think that they’ve been hurt and they’ve been really sensitive to the fact that their father hasn’t contributed too much into their lives.” For other fathers, the conflict was palpable. For example, Franklin, a 49-year-old father of one, remembered when his daughter was four or five years old and he called the house to talk to her. “And [the child’s mother] was telling her, ‘Your daddy’s on the phone,’ and I heard her in the background make a comment say, ‘So, he’ll just be going back to jail.’”

### **E. Substance abuse and mental health challenges**

On top of their struggles with employment, stable housing, and paying child support, some fathers contended with substance abuse and mental health issues. In some cases, fathers’ exposure to substance abuse and violence during childhood contributed to their own challenges with drugs and alcohol and mental health issues. For others, these challenges resulted from traumatic events in their lives.

#### **Substance abuse challenges**

Fully half of fathers described past and recent problems with substance abuse—struggles with alcohol or addictions to crack, crystal meth, cocaine, ecstasy, or other narcotics. More often than not, these challenges emerged as fathers told the stories of their childhoods, social circles and relationships, and stressful life events. Fathers with histories of substance abuse sometimes pointed to early life experiences with family members and friends whose lives revolved around addiction. Keshawn, 39 years old, offers one example:

I started [using drugs] . . . because that's basically how my family was. Everything revolved around a lot of drugs in my family. From smoking weed to smoking crack to drinking to all of that. Everything. . . . As I got older, I started getting into the drug usage myself. . . . I basically started [with] using tobacco and crack mixed together. I did that just for the first time when I was about 14.

By the time he was 18, Keshawn was selling drugs as well, noting that he “became pretty good at it. That’s how I got a lot of people to look up to me . . . to have the luxuries of things.”

Charles—who described his parents as “functioning alcoholics”—ended up being raised by his 21-year-old sister when his parents died in a motorcycle accident. But his sister turned the house into “a party house” with “people doing drugs,” and that led to him using drugs and going to jail at a young age. Charles felt that after his parents passed away, “they should have let me go to one of my relatives or to an orphanage or something.” He explained that he “ended up doing drugs and it got worse and worse and worse and then it escalated until I ended up going to jail; in and out of courts all the time; doing drugs and I was just a bad kid.”

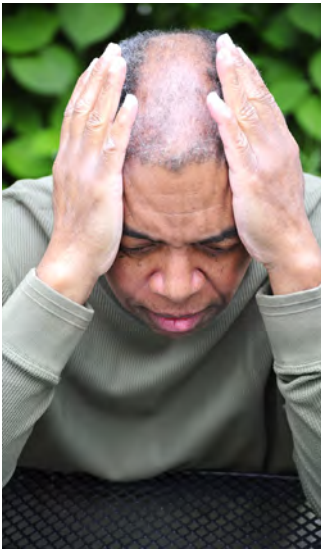


Some fathers said they began to use drugs to cope with the stress of an adverse life event. For example, Mitchell said that during the period when he was awaiting trial on a case that could result in a life sentence, he “did every drug. . . . When I had to wake up sometimes and realize I’m looking at life in jail, I was trying to escape my reality.” Similarly, Randy, a 35-year-old father of one, told us that his drug use “was more or less like self-medication” after his best friend was shot by a police officer.

Fathers with substance abuse histories frequently attributed their motivation for “getting clean” to the birth of a child, the realization that addiction was threatening the father-child bond, or pressure and/or support from a partner or family. For Everett, the combination of disapproval from his mother, pressure from his partner, who was pregnant with his second child, and his desire to be a better father to his children motivated him to quit using drugs:

[My children’s mother] told me, “You got a choice and I’m going to let you make it right now. Either it’s me and these two kids or you and them niggas with the dope. . . . [Then] my mom just told me that I didn’t look like her son, told me I look like a racehorse, smoking that crack. I said, “I got to make some changes.” I started eliminating . . . numbers [from my phone] and just started hanging around a whole new [kind of] people. I stopped smoking crack. . . . Never had to go to treatment or anything, just cold turkey quit. Didn’t need it no more because I needed my kids [more].

## Mental health challenges



One out of three fathers described experiencing emotional and mental health issues, although few had been formally diagnosed. Almost three-quarters of those who discussed dealing with mental health issues at some point in their life also indicated their histories included alcohol or substance abuse and addiction. Those who shared their formal diagnoses with us cited bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Some believed that past trauma had triggered episodes of mental distress. Lamar, a 47-year-old who had two children and had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, believed he suffered from PTSD “because I got shot in a drug deal gone bad and my buddy took a bullet to the brain and fell on me dead in my truck.”

Episodes of depression or emotional instability, often sparked by significant life challenges, were also common among fathers who discussed their mental health. For example, Andre talked about the depression he experienced during his reentry to life outside prison:

Since I've been home this time . . . I done got so depressed where I want to end my life . . . depression got so bad, where I feel like [my family] would be better without me [due to] my financial instability. . . . Then you got this fake-ass support [from family] where they wait for me to fail. They don't have no faith in me. . . . Sometimes I get depressed. I let that depression eat me. It eats me. 'Cause I'm hard[er] on myself than anybody else can be hard on me.

The potential prevalence of depression among fathers in the qualitative study is also suggested in the baseline survey findings, which included questions from a diagnostic screening tool (the Patient Health Questionnaire). The survey suggests that approximately 28 percent of fathers had signs of moderate to severe depression.

A few fathers found the connection to their children and their desire to be there for them helped in their struggle to overcome depression. For example, Darwin told us:

After my mom died [my son] was the only thing that kept me basically alive. I was ready to off my own self. I held the gun into my face several times. . . . I had nothing out here to live for, [with my son's mother] playing games and not letting me see him. He was a little baby at the time. [But] I just thought of my little boy. . . .

One behavioral manifestation of mental and emotional distress was fathers' anger management issues—problems that fathers attributed to their childhood trauma but were also magnified by substance abuse. In addition to depression and suicidal thoughts, Darwin described his struggles with managing his anger, saying, “That's all I've known [since childhood]. I still struggle with it. When I get mad I just want to

take off on somebody. I know that ain't the right thing but it's [my] natural [reaction]." Lamar said that repeated experiences of rejection from family members throughout childhood "led me to be very violent. . . . I can be a very violent person, especially when you pour some alcohol down my throat."

### F. Physical health limitations

Physical health problems could make it even more difficult for fathers to make ends meet and piece their lives together. Limiting health problems ranged from back and shoulder and leg problems to epilepsy. Although some of these physical health problems stemmed from fathers' childhoods—for example, Ed, 38 years old father of two, had a plate in his head and leg problems as a result of gang violence—others faced health issues that cropped up as they grew older. About half of these fathers had health problems that were serious enough that they were receiving or applying for SSI/SSDI, including traumatic brain injuries, partial deafness, and severe arthritis. Some of these fathers said that making ends meet was or would be difficult even with SSI/SSDI benefits. Ed, for example, who had applied for SSI/SSDI, felt that "you can't just live off [SSI/SSDI] . . . that's just to pay a bill, pay your rent, and probably a light bill or something. You can't take care of yourself or [your] family off that."



Among fathers with physical health issues who did not receive or apply for SSI/SSDI, some had health issues that proved challenging but did not prevent them from working (for example, asthma, poor eyesight, knee problems). However, others faced more severe issues that led to greater instability, including job loss, rounds of doctor visits, and sometimes mental health issues. For example, Mark lost a security job six years ago after having a seizure at work, and this led to depression and a long period of unemployment ever since. Mark explained that his boss "didn't want to employ an epileptic. . . . As soon as I'd had [a seizure] on the job I was a risk to him and his small business so I was expendable. . . ."

## Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates how the turmoil that began in fathers' early lives continued into adulthood for these men. These men struggled with multiple, interrelated challenges that added to the complexity and difficulty of their lives as they became fathers, managed relationships with their children's mothers, and sought to increase involvement in their children's lives and economically support themselves. Yet despite these challenges, all of the fathers in our study were attempting to set their lives on a more stable path and fill their role as fathers more effectively.



## VII. “I’M A BETTER FATHER . . . I’M TAKING THE STEPS THAT I NEED” – EXPERIENCES IN RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS



We have seen that for participants in the Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs, the role of father is intensely meaningful and a source of motivation to turn their lives around and connect with their children. They want to become more engaged and better parents. Yet we have also seen that they face formidable challenges to success, ranging from their own troubled childhoods and lack of positive role models, to perceived gatekeeping by their children’s mothers, unemployment and lack of economic security, instability in housing, and the lasting effects of incarceration. Here we explore fathers’ motivations for coming to RF programs, their experiences participating in the programs, and what they say they gained from these experiences.

### **A. How fathers learned about the program and why they enrolled**

Fathers most often heard about the RF programs via word of mouth, often from family members, friends, or acquaintances. For Cedric, “My mama had suggested [the Fathers’ Support Center] for me. . . . I just woke up and walked up in there and registered . . . . That was a part of me finding my way, setting some goals. . . . I wanted to see what they had to offer me. What could they do to make me better?”

Social service agencies were the next most common source of referral. Carl was chatting with a receptionist from a different agency when she “hooked him up” with Connections to Success. “She was a real warm type of lady, just having a conversation.” Moreover, she said, “You sound like you just need a little guidance and a little resources. . . . I’m going to hook you up with this place called Connection.”



Fathers were also drawn to the RF programs through direct outreach from the staff. Dexter explained that he learned about Fathers' Support Center this way: "Yeah, [the program staff said] they'll be able to help me get to [my] kids. . . . So I was like, "Man, hold on. . . ! Oh, yeah! Yeah, I need to get in this."

RF programs address key elements of fathers' lives: parenting and fatherhood, relationship skills, economic stability, and personal development.

RF programs address three elements of fathers' lives: parenting and fatherhood, relationship skills, and economic stability. In addition, although not required programming, each RF program in the PACT evaluation also addressed personal development.<sup>11</sup> While all RF grantees offer this content, their programs vary in design and structure, including the amount and focus on each element, the sequence and duration of services, and the frequency and mode of service delivery. These can all affect the type of content and amount of services received by fathers (Zaveri et al. 2015; see the box below for summary descriptions of the four RF programs).

The baseline survey asked applicants about the primary reason they came to apply, offering three choices: to improve relationships with their children, to improve relationships with their children's mothers, and to improve their job situations. Almost two-thirds of fathers in the qualitative study said the most important reason was to improve their relationship with their child. Thirty percent reported that improving their job situation was the primary driver. Very few—6 percent—said that a desire to improve their relationship with the mother of their children was most important.

The in-depth interviews explored in greater detail why fathers decided to enroll and what they hoped to gain from the program. Not surprisingly, when men were given the option to discuss this issue in an open-ended interview, they often gave more detailed and multiple explanations than when given just three broad choices. For this reason, the percentages provided below add up to more than 100 percent.

### **Desire to become better fathers and improve access to their children**

The motivation that encouraged about 40 percent of fathers to enroll in an RF program, according to the in-depth interviews, was their desire to be a better father—to be more involved and equipped with the necessary parenting skills. These men often sought to gain new skills to be better fathers, to gain greater access to their children, and to become more engaged in their children's lives. About half in this group sought to ensure greater access through legal means, via parenting time agreements or custody awards. While they were often also eager to find employment to improve their economic situation and capacity to provide for their children and themselves, the desire to form a stronger connection with their children was typically at the heart of their decision to enroll in the RF program.

## PACT Responsible Fatherhood Programs

- **Successful STEPS program at Connections to Success (CtS).** Successful STEPS operates in Kansas City, Kansas and Missouri. CtS has a history of providing personal development and employment services to prison reentry populations. Low-income fathers who do not have serious substance abuse or mental health issues, or criminal histories related to sexual misconduct, are eligible for services. The program includes a cohort-based daily workshop that lasts two and a half weeks and integrates content in personal development, employment, and parenting. A separate, open-entry workshop that is offered weekly delivers relationship content for graduates of the integrated workshop. CtS partners with a domestic violence organization and the Kansas and Missouri child support agencies to provide services.
- **Family Formation Program at Fathers' Support Center (FSC).** The Family Formation Program operates in St. Louis, Missouri. FSC has guided low-income fathers to be self-sufficient, responsible, and committed to strong family relationships for over 15 years; fathers who have at least one child under 10 years old are eligible. Fathers with substance abuse problems must attend treatment and pass drug screenings while in the program. The program consists of a six-week cohort-based daily workshop that integrates personal development, parenting, employment, and healthy relationship content. FSC partners with a domestic violence organization, the Missouri child support agency, and two local employment agencies to provide services.
- **The FATHER Project at Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota.** The FATHER Project operates in St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota. For over 15 years it has provided employment and parenting services to fathers who are unemployed or have trouble paying child support. Low-income fathers between the ages of 17 and 40 who do not have a criminal history related to sexual misconduct or domestic violence are eligible. The program includes three open-entry workshops: weekly parenting and healthy relationship workshops, and a single-day employment workshop. All participants must first attend a two-day orientation. The FATHER Project partners with a number of organizations for service delivery, including county child support agencies, an organization that provides culturally sensitive services to Spanish-speaking parents, an organization providing legal services, and an early childhood education and home visiting program.
- **The Center for Fathering at Urban Ventures (UV).** The Center for Fathering operates in Minneapolis, Minnesota. UV has a two-decade history of providing parenting services to low-income fathers, with a focus on African American men. Low-income fathers over 18, from any background, are eligible for program services. The program consists of three separate open-entry weekly workshops in parenting, relationship skills, and employment services. UV partners with the county child support agency and a domestic violence organization.

Source: Zaveri et al. 2015.

"I know how it feels when a child doesn't have their parent around. So, I went to Fathers' Support [Center] to get some more parenting skills . . ."

Marcus

Many fathers felt they lacked basic child-rearing skills because their own fathers were absent or minimally involved. For these men, the experience of their own father's absence often galvanized their desire to be present in their children's lives. For example, Marcus told an interviewer, "I know how it feels when a child doesn't have their parent around. So, I went to Fathers' Support [Center] to get some more parenting skills . . . for me to raise my daughter [better]." Martin, an expectant first-time father, enrolled because he was eager for any information on parenting he could glean: "I wasn't even a father yet. I was like yeah I'm going to need everything they're going to tell us. . . . Tips on how to raise our children, how to bond with them."

Even years after being separated from their children, some fathers were drawn to an RF program out of a desire to reconnect with them. Although Zakary saw his younger children regularly, it had been three years since he had seen his oldest child:

I'm not making any excuses for what I did. But I changed. I went to school. I graduated. I started going to therapy, anger management . . . [and to] these parenting classes [at Urban Ventures] because I wanted to get a better relationship with my children. I wanted to learn how to start listening to my kids . . . and pay attention to them.



Gaining greater access to their children was a motivating factor for several fathers. Some were trying to negotiate better access informally, but others wanted to establish legal rights to visit their children, and some aspired to play a greater decision-making role in their children's lives. Fathers in both groups were often eager for more information about their rights, as well as what steps they could take to secure those rights.

For example, a father of one, J.T., told us, “I just wanted to know answers to my questions about my daughter, what rights I had [to see her] and all of that.” Similarly, Sammy, 27, explained, “I needed some type of information on what to do about me not being able to see my child like I want to.” Leroy, who has one child, hoped the

### **Kemal’s story: “A place where you have resources and...a networking system”**

Kemal, a 28 year old African American father of one had a “wild and reckless” childhood that involved joining a gang and selling and using drugs by the age of 14. He was sentenced to eight and a half years in prison for carjacking when he was 18, and learned that his girlfriend was pregnant with their child soon after being incarcerated. He saw his daughter fairly regularly during part of his incarceration, but only intermittently for other parts. Kemal said it was difficult to pay \$50 a month in child support when “I’m in prison and the highest paying job was \$10 per month.”

After being released from prison two years ago, Kemal graduated from trade school and worked in construction on jobs that required travel and a demanding schedule. He recently found a new job as a janitor so he could pursue additional schooling and because work affected his ability to go to church and “spend time with my daughter or . . . do different things that a father is supposed to do.” He is seeking custody of his daughter because the child was removed from the mother’s house as a result of physical abuse by her boyfriend. His daughter currently lives with her aunt, but she limits Kemal’s access to his daughter. In addition, he is concerned that she is not doing enough to promote his daughter’s development. As a result of gatekeeping by the child’s aunt, he has not seen his daughter for about three months.

Kemal enrolled in the Fathers’ Support Center (FSC) to get legal assistance with his custody case because he is representing himself in court. Although the program did not provide legal representation in court, they told him “You let us know where you’re at with your case and then we will tell you the next steps or we’ll give you advice and counsel.” Staff at FSC printed a custody petition for him and told him “whatever you don’t understand, leave blank and we’ll help you with it.” An attorney at FSC helped him with “all the shortcuts” in the child custody process and told him how to check on the status of his case.

He said that the program had a “massive impact” and without it, he would still be “fishing around for information” and resources to help with his custody case. He described how it is difficult going through the custody process alone, “but, if you have a place where you have resources and then you have a networking system to have more resources you have enough of what you need.” In addition, Kemal explained that:

I learned a lot about how we think we’re alone in experiencing certain things, in this case child custody, the drama . . . I’m not alone in that area and there are people going through worse than what I’m going through that have multiple children with multiple women and . . . all of them use the child to get something out of you. For me, it was a learning experience to be grateful for what I am going through and to acknowledge that it can be worse than what it actually is and it’s not that bad.

FATHER Project would “help me see my son . . . and have [joint] custody and be there for him so I don’t have to just play the baby mama drama games.” Kemal, described in the box on the next page, provides an example of a father who sought help with the process of obtaining custody of his daughter.

A few fathers already had visitation orders or joint custody agreements, yet their children’s mothers still refused access. These fathers wanted help learning how to negotiate their relationships with their former partners, or sought information on what legal recourse they had to enforce these orders and agreements.

### **Desire for employment and higher wages**

Obtaining employment or better employment was a program attraction for roughly 40 percent of the sample. Many in this group were jobless and actively seeking work. While many believed that their criminal histories were a barrier to employment, very few said they sought help in overcoming this limitation. Most desired immediate employment, though a few also mentioned seeking educational and training opportunities.

### **Desire to improve relationships with their children’s mothers**

Very few fathers said that they enrolled in an RF program to improve their relationships with the mothers of their children, despite the high prevalence of contentious relationships discussed in Chapter 5. Tavion, a first-time expectant dad, was one exception. He told us, “I already knew that I had a baby on the way. That’s what inspired me to come. . . . I just wanted to see what type of help I still could get to show my baby mama that I cared.” Marquis, a father of one, was drawn to the program because “I was actually trying to figure out how to build a better relationship with my baby mama.”

Many fathers enrolled in the RF program because they needed help in multiple domains.

### **Need for “Help” in multiple domains**

Many fathers, about one-quarter of those interviewed, enrolled in the RF program because they needed help in multiple domains. Kemal offers one example:

I walked in there and it was like pretty much I didn’t know what to expect. I knew I wanted some help. I knew they offered help and so . . . I was like “Okay; let’s see what type of help this is.” They told me the different areas of help they gave and I was like “Wow, I really needed these other things you guys supply too!” Like financial counsel, they have a class on financial literacy, they have a class on . . . [what] caused you to be the type of father that you are, or the type of person that you are.

Gabriel offered a similar account:

One of the guys [who runs the program] was telling me about how I can benefit. . . . He said, “Well, if you do these classes, you can learn something and you can earn something.” He’s like, “Not only that, you can [get] a certificate proving that you did it and a t-shirt.” I was like, “You can’t beat that . . . especially if you’re not working or doing something that’s important already, why not come improve on your skills to how to be a parent?”

Keshawn too was drawn by the wide array of program offerings, but was also searching for a way to “give back” to the community, helping other fathers like himself:

[I came for] more parenting skills, what I could do to be a better parent towards my kids. Child support. If I need to file a motion how I go about doing it. Also, living skills, empowerment . . . leadership. How can I give back to the community, helping other parents and helping myself?

## **B. What fathers received and valued from their RF program experience**

Trying to become better fathers and finding a job were the two most common reasons men enrolled, and services to help them achieve these goals were the ones they most often discussed. Although not a strong motivation for enrolling, a few fathers appreciated learning how to better manage relationships with their children’s mothers. Relatively few fathers talked about getting assistance modifying their child support order or reducing their arrears, although the amount of such potential reductions could be substantial. Fathers especially valued the opportunity to interact with other men like them, including other participants and RF program staff.

### **Learning about the role of fathers, acquiring parenting skills, gaining information on access issues**

One message these RF programs clearly delivered to fathers was that building a relationship with one’s child is important, even for those who cannot provide much financially. Many fathers came to a deeper understanding of how important their involvement was. For most, this meant increased awareness of the value of spending time with their children (i.e., “being there”) and communicating with them. This represented a shift for some men, who had believed before coming to the program that if they couldn’t provide financially, they had little else to contribute. Franklin is a case in point:





“[The RF program] taught me [that] if you can’t be there financially, you still need to be there mentally. . . . Just being a dad or a parent doesn’t just stop at the financial responsibility . . . ”

Franklin

Connections [to Success] taught me [that] if you can’t be there financially, you still need to be there mentally. . . . They connected a whole lot of the dots for me. . . . Just being a dad or a parent doesn’t just stop at the financial responsibility. . . . It just made me think about just a lot of the different areas that I wasn’t there [for my oldest daughter]. It just kind of woke my senses up. It was kind of an awakening. . . . I can’t go back into time and change anything. I can’t get a redo. [But] the things that I picked up from Connections to Success show me that I have a lot to offer.

Duane said he learned from Urban Ventures that:

Your children [are] the most important thing in your life, after you have them. . . . It’s a different [kind of] responsibility. [Building] a relationship with your children [is] the best thing you can do. You don’t have to come to them loaded with stuff. As long as they see you and you talk to them, play with them, it makes a difference.

Another common lesson men took from these programs is that they should communicate differently with their children than their own parents had communicated with them. Byron explained how his communication with his child had been altered as a result of the parenting component of Urban Ventures: “[I] learned to not . . . [say] ‘because I said so.’ Like, I start[ed] explaining to him why I need him to do certain things a certain way, or why you can’t have that, or why you can’t play in the street.” Similarly, Vaughn, a father of three, described improved parental interactions with his children due to the Connections to Success curriculum: “I’m more of a listener now; instead of ‘You better [do this or else],’ I actually listen to what they have to say now and compromise with them. Keep it fair.” The box on the next page describes the communication skills Keshawn learned from the FATHER Project, as well as other ways the program helped him become a better father.

Fathers who lived long distances from a child often valued learning how to structure conversations over the phone in order to stay better connected to their children. Here is what Emmet said he learned from the parenting component at the FATHER Project:

How to build a relationship with my daughter throughout a long distance. How to craft a good conversation, how to have a focused conversation, figure out what’s going in her life. . . . You ask . . . “Well, what stood out to you at school today . . . ? Was there anything at school that inspired you, excited you, made you frustrated . . . ?” The next question [to ask] would be . . . “What could you have done [differently?]” or . . . “Why did it make you feel that way?” And then the last question [would be] “What do you do next time to make sure that you don’t go through that? What will you do next time to make sure you have fun, or not get into trouble?”



### **Keshawn's story: "I want to be a better father"**

Keshawn, a 39 year old African American, grew up with his mother and an abusive stepfather. Recalling his childhood, Keshawn explained how, "Everything revolved around a lot [of] drugs . . . From smoking weed to smoking crack to drinking to all of that." Keshawn described his family as "poor" and observed that the money being spent on drugs "could have been going towards what we needed."

Keshawn moved out of the house when he was around 17 years old. In the years that followed, Keshawn fathered five different children, each by a different mother. However, his drug addiction took first place at the center of his life: "I was thinking about getting high all the time." Keshawn struggled with his drug addiction for many years before going into a rehabilitation program and he had been clean for four months when we interviewed him.

Keshawn enrolled in the FATHER Project because he wanted "to be a better father." A FATHER Project staff person (called a father advocate) helped him develop a personalized "fatherhood plan" with short and long-term goals and he attended workshop sessions on parenting. Keshawn said that he applies the parenting and communication skills he learned "on a day-to-day basis" including "how to . . . let my kids open up and talk [about] what's troubling them and what's bothering them, instead of being so judgmental." He also learned how to prepare healthy foods for his kids. Keshawn feels the program improved his parenting skills and his relationship with his children. He said:

It help us be a little more closer because they can come and talk to me without feeling like that they're going to be in trouble. I allow them to pretty much express their opinion . . . if it's something that you've got to get off your chest and you need me to know, then I allow for you to express it because I don't want you to have no type of fear. I want you to know that your father is here; that I'm listening and I love you and I care about you. I don't want you to feel like you can't come and talk to me for nothing whatsoever.

An employment counselor at the FATHER Project helped Keshawn get his current job at Chipotle by helping him update his resume, search online, complete an application, and "made sure I got everything completed."

Overall, Keshawn thinks the program had:

. . . a big impact on my life . . . helping me to be a better person, a better father, a better brother, a better uncle in life. It's helping me to get a lot of the fundamentals of empowerment parenting and employment underneath my belt, and . . . giving me that determination in being successful . . . it takes away that fear. Because they help you, they prepare you . . . It gives you that boost, that confidence that I can go out and do it. I can become whatever I want to. I can do whatever I want to.

Darvin has a 7-year-old son who lives some distance away. He found that the group aspect of the FATHER Project gave him the insight he needed to stay connected with his uncommunicative son, Dion, by phone.

When I call Dion—it's been happening more and more and as time goes by . . . where he'll get on the phone and be like, "I don't want to talk." Right away, without even saying hello. . . . That kind of got me stressing . . . out really bad. I look forward the whole week to calling him and . . . he don't even want to talk to me. I was kind of on the verge of just not calling because it's tearing me down. . . . It puts me in the gutter. . . . I brought that to the group and a lot of guys [heard] where I was coming from but they [helped me to look] at it from his point of view. He's 7 years old and he's got a lot going on in his life. He's a kid. The . . . important thing is just as long as he hears my voice he'll always remember that. . . . At least I call him, and . . . say . . . "Just know I love you and you're on my mind." That helped a lot and that made sense. I wasn't seeing that at first.



The importance of expressing love—both verbally and through physical affection—was a lesson mentioned by only a few, yet the impact could be significant or, as Gabriel told us, even “miraculous”:

[We did a survey at Urban Ventures that asked us,] “How often do you hug the kids? How often do you tell them you love them?” I’m looking at the questions . . . I started to cry actually, because I . . . really hadn’t told my kids I love them. . . . These classes reminded me of that. I was kind of down about it and the next morning I woke up . . . and they were getting ready to go to school and I had pajamas on and I had cooked them breakfast. . . . I said, “You know what? I love you guys. . . .” They just gave me the most big embrace that a dad could ever get in life. [And after] I said that to them . . . I got a phone call from all three of their teachers. Now this is like a miraculous [story]. You usually get a call that, “She did this, they did that, they said this, they have an attitude.” All three of their teachers called and they said [how well my kids were doing in school].

Several fathers said the program taught them that corporal punishment was not appropriate and learned about alternative disciplining techniques. Antwon, a father of seven, says he learned to replace “whooping” with positive reinforcement:

You ain’t got to scream and holler at your kids. You ain’t really got to spank them. You take one little thing from them, say like a videogame. You take that from them that’s going to make them think “No, I want to play my game. So I know I got to do this here in order for me to get this game.” It’s like a swap. . . . Usually I be ready to whoop them—I ain’t even going to lie—I be ready to whoop them. But now I know another way around it . . . that I didn’t know before I come to these classes.

A few fathers also remarked that they’d learned a lot about age-appropriate expectations from participation in the RF program. Tyrese, who has three children, said that at Fathers’ Support Center, he learned:

You must give [your children] age-appropriate instruction. It would be way different telling something to an 8- [or] 9-year-old than you would tell to your 12- or 14-year-old. You have to discipline them totally different. Like with Shanta. She’s 3. . . . I’ll be like “Well, Shanta, you pick these clothes up . . . and you put them in a basket.” Now, for Izabel, I would tell her “Okay, you’re 8. Clean your room. You wash the dishes and you make sure the kitchen is clean.” If we had like a 14-year-old or something [I’d say,] “Clean your room up. Go get the back yard done. Make sure the grass is cut. Wash the dishes.”

About a quarter of RF participants said they received information about parenting time or custody issues, although most fathers did not live with their children and desired greater access and more involvement with them. Many fathers who obtained information on custody and parenting time issues expressed appreciation for what they learned about their rights as fathers or about the process of establishing custody. Issac, a 28-year-old, had a daughter he had lost access to completely. He told an interviewer

that the Fathers' Support Center's staff helped him "to find [my] daughter, trying to get visitation. . . . They type up a letter for you. They show you how you fill out this packet so you can turn in . . . a petition."



### Improving job readiness and job search skills

Relatively few fathers—just over 10 percent—said they got a job through their participation in the RF program. Even though program participation might not have yet translated into employment at the time we spoke with fathers, they often had positive feedback about the job readiness and job search skills they obtained through the programs. One-quarter of fathers talked about the help they received creating or updating their resume and/or posting the resume to online job search sites. For some fathers, this meant improving an existing resume, but others were helped to develop a resume for the first time. Darius, a father of seven, said that through resume coaching at Connections to Success, he learned to present his past work experience and skills in a way that demonstrated greater self-confidence to prospective employers—and the changes he made produced positive results:

Now I have a confident résumé and so I posted it on Career Builders and it started building my career. And . . . I had four interviews yesterday. So yeah, they're helping me. I learned, they taught, and they did their job.

Some men said they learned how to fill out job applications differently too. "Now, if I fill out an application I'm more likely to get called back because I know how to fill them out now and I know what I was doing wrong," Vincent told us. Xavier had little computer literacy before participating in the program. He said that the program staff showed him "what websites to go to try to put an application in and just learning the keyboards. Things I kind of missed out on in school."

For Kurtis, as well as some others, help centered on how to fill out an application in a manner that would not prematurely prejudice an employer against him:

I think the most important [thing I learned] was filling out that application. . . . They told me you're not supposed to put all your information down. Put your last four social [security numbers] down, not your whole social. If you're a felon, write you are a felon, but don't write down what you're a felon for. . . . Wait for the interview to sit down and explain to them and explain this stuff that you are doing different.

Fathers also described acquiring new interviewing skills, including how to conduct oneself during interviews, how to dress appropriately, and what questions to ask employers. Omari said he learned at Connections to Success that an interview was like “a 30 second commercial . . . 30 seconds is to sell yourself. . . . They help you out with that really good.” Fathers sometimes practiced these skills in mock interviews.

Programs sometimes included direct instruction on how to deal with questions regarding past incarceration. For example, Taylor said that Connections to Success program staff taught him:

. . . how to speak about [my felony conviction], when to bring it up and when not to bring it up. . . . Don't keep dwelling on it other than to say, “Well I went to prison for three years or nine years. . . . I'm not proud of the decision that I made back then. I'm a changed man now and trying to move forward in my life.”

Roughly a third of fathers described receiving information about job openings from the RF programs. This came in many forms. Some said they were given a list of potential job openings from job developers. Others said program staff arranged interviews with local employers. Some programs recruited local employers for on-site job fairs. For example, Reginald described an employer's visit at Urban Ventures: “I think it was Kmart or Walmart—was taking applications. [The program's job developer] said, ‘You might get hired today right in this room!’”

The RF programs also sometimes offered group activities such as job clubs, which fathers appreciated not only for the practical assistance offered by peers, but for the sense of community they fostered. One father of two, Caleb, described how he had benefited from the Fathers' Support Center's job club activity:

[We share] any information that we picked up on our own . . . we just bring it all back to the group and share it with each other. . . . We'd pass out our phone numbers. . . . You need a ride, [you could] call on certain brothers in the group that was willing to come pick up others who didn't have rides.

Some fathers described how program staff had offered specific job leads or had intervened directly in some way. For example, Garrett told us he was rejected from a job because of a misdemeanor on his record, though the employer said he would reconsider if Garrett could offer additional evidence that he had turned his life around. FATHER Project staff then provided the needed documentation:

“[We] came up with a brand new Omari: a guy that can walk in a place, give eye contact, firm handshake and carry himself in a professional manner . . .”

Omari

I had gone on this job interview and I didn't pass, but . . . they say I can . . . give them some evidence [that I've changed]. . . . I did do the domestic abuse project program and I had done the parenting stuff and I have been substance free since 2010. . . . I got all these people to provide all this evidence and submit it. . . . By that time six weeks had gone by but the job was still there. . . . I went in and yeah, they hired me.

Greater confidence in one's ability to get a job was one benefit some fathers spoke eloquently about. Omari shared just what aspects of the employment and training services had helped to create a confident, “brand new Omari”:

[We] came up with a brand new Omari: a guy that can walk in a place, give eye contact, firm handshake and carry himself in a professional manner instead of coming to a place and looking like you don't know where you're at, you don't know if you fit in these places, you don't know how to conduct yourself in a professional way. Instead of being nervous . . . now I walk, talk, dress with better confidence.

Like Omari, Maurice said program staff taught him to focus “on the good things I had to offer” when interviewing with employers:

I was starting to learn things from [my instructor]. I said “Wow. I think I could get a job. . . . I see where I've been going wrong in getting a job.” I had a lot of self-confidence problems and I kept shooting myself in the foot and anytime I had [an] interaction [with an employer]. . . . I just was taught to focus on the good things that I had to offer . . .

Several fathers admitted that at the time they entered the program, they had lost the motivation to even try to find a job. For these fathers, the employment and training activities renewed their motivation. Some offered accounts like the following, from Ramon, who attended Fathers' Support Center:

The program helped me . . . stop making excuses and figure out a way [to] keep trying. As long as you keep trying you're eventually going to find your way through. . . . Once you start thinking that way, the doors start opening up for you as soon as you stop being your own worst enemy. That's what you learn. You learn more about yourself than anything in Fathers' Support [Center].



### **Jason's story: "They teach you everything you need... I love this program, man"**

Jason, a 23 year old African American father of a five-month old son, has lived "a hard knock life." His father was sentenced to 75 years in prison for murder and he did not meet his mother until he was nine. He grew up in a foster home, began selling drugs at a young age, and became involved with gangs and street life.

Despite the odds, Jason completed high school and worked off and on before spending time in jail twice for stealing cars. He took a plea deal for the second charge because his girlfriend of three years was pregnant and he "didn't want to miss [his first son] being born." Jason's son was born two months after he was released from jail, "and it changed my life, I wanted to do something better in life."

Jason learned about Connections to Success (CtS) through a fellow inmate, and his probation officer sent him to check out the program. Jason completed the two-week program at CtS and attended the job club. He currently lives with the mother of his child and their son, and is working on an associate's degree in diesel mechanics while searching for a job.

Jason appreciated how CtS staff "teach you everything you need to know about getting a job." Program staff prepared him for job interviews with information on "ways to talk to the interviewer . . . common questions to ask . . . and what you might expect an interviewer to say to you or ask you." In addition, CtS gave him "a big packet every week of job leads," provided a suit and tie, and offered him rides to interviews. He explained how his past felonies are a barrier to finding a job, "Don't nobody want to hire nobody with a theft charge," but noted that "if you have a felony, [the program] will tell you how to answer that [question] correctly."

Jason said his case manager, who was like a "brother" to him, helped to mediate a discussion between him and his partner:

He'll sit down and talk to me and then he'll go call my baby mama and say, "You need to come talk to me too. I done heard his side of the story, but I want to [hear] your side of the story." Then he'll sit us together and talk to us, like, "Y'all need to do this, you need to stop arguing, y'all need to sit down, y'all need to get together, start job searching together and you need to go to school and finish your education out."

Although Jason says he "never knew" about fathering, the program helped him through the stress of having a newborn and being a new father. He also learned that "A real man is a father. A real man take care of his responsibilities."

Reflecting on what his life would have been like without the program he says, "I probably would have said forget it and gave up and went back to the streets. For real, I love this program, man."



A personal connection with particular program staff members proved crucial for many of these fathers who had become discouraged in their job search.

A few fathers appreciated the program for bringing structure to their time, and helping them set goals and define the steps they needed to take to achieve their goals. Xavier credited Fathers' Support Center with "get[ting] us back into getting up in the mornings. . . . It's like I got to be there at 7:45 AM every morning, so I come in and just like clocking in. It's like a job. Getting up every morning and pretty much presenting myself." Similarly, Vincent, also an FSC participant, told us he valued learning about "the Three P's":

It's practice, preparation and perseverance. I try to practice at what I do, prepare for the things that I'm coming in to. Like, say for instance my interview this morning. I got up this morning and made sure I was dressed nice. I went and got my hair cut yesterday, preparation. . . . That's stuff . . . that I think about . . . every day now.

A personal connection with particular program staff members proved crucial for many of these fathers who had become discouraged in their job search. Jason, for example, told us:

The counselor at Connections to Success is a good man. . . . I come to him with so much. I be like, "Man, I feel like giving up." He'll give me a long good speech and be like, "Naw man, I ain't going to let you do that." He's like my brother. . . . Because he's that good influence and when you get down, he can pick you back up like, ugh, get back up here. . . . He's like, "Man, I ain't going to let you fall down."

The box on the next page more closely examines Jason's experience at Connections to Success receiving employment services and obtaining assistance for other challenges he faced as a new father.

### **Better relationships with their children's mothers**

As documented earlier in this report, many men reported conflict-ridden relationships with their children's mothers. This conflict often directly interfered with their ability to have contact with their children, and triggered deep anger and frustration. Yet few said they enrolled in an RF program for help in navigating their relationships with their children's mothers.

Nonetheless, through the RF programs, some men reported learning how to better manage those emotions. Jason, quoted in the box on the next page, offered an example: "When my baby mama would come sit at me or argue with me for no reason, they would tell me walk it off, don't argue back with her, stay calm." Kyree said his relationship improved once he learned at Urban Ventures that abuse could take verbal, not just physical, forms: "I've never jumped on a woman [but I learned] that some of the things you say are actually a certain level of abuse. Whether it be to a man or a woman."

Dameon, from Urban Ventures, offered a similar account, but for him, the benefit derived from his sense of what his own rights were as a partner, and how to draw a line in the face of verbal abuse:

I had to let her know that it's not okay to call me names or say mean things to me, no matter how you feel. . . . I had to block her from the phone because I don't deserve that, I don't give it to her and she definitely don't have the right to give it to me. . . . I'm bigger than her—being immature, her negativity, her stuff like that. When I see it now, I don't stand for it, I don't tolerate it.

Some fathers who benefited from the relationship skills building were still in a relationship with the mother of at least one of their children or had a current partner. One such father, James, said that his communication with his partner had improved markedly as a result of participating in the program at Fathers' Support Center:

Through the program, somehow the communication . . . just started happening. Slowly but surely we just started communicating. Simple things, "how is your day?" We was able to sit down and eat dinner and actually talk instead of "chomp, chomp, chomp."

Taylor told an interviewer that Connections to Success had helped him avoid relationship conflict: "[I learned that] if you see something that's causing a conflict or a problem with her in your relationship, then remove it. Don't allow it to draw more attention. Remove it. . . . [Now] I do more sacrifice instead of being selfish."

### Navigating the child support system

Fathers with formal child support orders were sometimes drawn to the program for help with child support issues. Among the 58 percent of fathers with formal child support orders, almost one in three sought assistance with child support issues. These fathers primarily sought help with reducing arrears, though a few wanted to modify their child support order or get help having their driver license reinstated. Although a few of these fathers said at the time they were interviewed they had reduced their arrears or modified their orders, others were still in the midst of getting assistance, had received information but not assistance, or did not have much to say about the program's assistance with child support.

Even though only a few fathers indicated that their arrears had been reduced or orders modified, the amounts involved could be substantial. A couple of fathers had their child support orders reduced by hundreds of dollars a month, and a few fathers had thousands of dollars forgiven off their back child support. One father of six, Kolby, told us about particularly dramatic results: "When I got involved with [the FATHER Project], [I owed] \$48,000 in back child support. I got [it down to] \$3,000 from \$48,000. . . . Yep. Got my license back, and all that."

Darvin, a 29-year-old father of two, told us how he succeeded in getting his child support modified. He explained:



I got it [child support order] dropped pretty low. I went to court last month . . . . I got a paper from [the FATHER project staff person] to bring there saying what the program was and I'm in it and a paper from the Director at the halfway house telling them how I surrender half of my wages to them, that's a requirement, and what the program is about and how I'm doing there. . . . I gave her [the state's attorney] the paperwork and the papers I had. She said well here's the deal. Looking at your income I want \$500 a month. . . . She's like if you don't want to sign for that, then we can go into court. I said well I'd rather just talk to the judge. She said that's your right and you can exercise it. . . . I actually went into court and then talked to the judge. . . . He's like . . . you're right, \$500 a month is kind of extreme, so how does 10 percent of that sound, which is \$50 a month. They take \$15 a week. I can do that. Yeah, I can do that and that don't really affect my paycheck at all.

Some fathers said they learned about the inner workings of the child support system through participation in an RF program. Emmett “learned the whole process to go through and how to [modify a child support order] and different things like that,” although he added that the program did not have anyone who “could come to court with me or actually provide like court documents or summons.”

RF programs not only provided concrete assistance navigating child support, they connected a few men to others facing similar challenges, whether participants or staff. Patrick, for example, told us how much he had gained through listening to the inspirational story of one father in the Urban Ventures program:

He didn't think he had no rights, just like a lot of us black men don't think we have rights. . . . So when he told me that it took him a long time for the courts to give him partial custody of his children, and what that meant to him once he was able to establish that, [I was inspired]. So that helped me and that amazed me in a lot of ways because I never really seen nobody singlehandedly fight the system for custody battle, and then get favorable results as a black man with a criminal background.

Fathers valued the camaraderie and support of other fathers in the program and appreciated knowing they were “not alone.”

### Group sessions and helpful, supportive staff

More than a third of fathers valued the camaraderie and support of other fathers in the program. Some fathers appreciated knowing they were “not alone,” or that their problems “weren't so bad” when compared to those of other fathers. In a similar vein, fathers felt the groups gave them a place where they “fit in.” Duane, from Urban Ventures, offers an example: “You kind of learn from other people's experience and you kind of be like, ‘Wow! There's all these people that got all these problems.’ [Then I'm thinking] ‘Hey, I thought I'm facing the worst situation in my life, but by comparison. . . .’ That makes you feel better.”

Several African American fathers specifically liked being in groups predominantly consisting of black men from similar backgrounds. They found themselves with men who had similar experiences with the criminal justice system, with drugs and alcohol, and in their relationships with their children and the mothers of their children. A few of these fathers valued the “brotherhood” and camaraderie of the group. Others enjoyed the cathartic nature of the groups, where they had a chance to share past experiences and current problems in a setting that allowed for honest, nonjudgmental discussion

### **Zakary’s story: “Some down-to-earth brothers that I respected.”**

Zakary is a 31-year old African American father of three whose parents divorced when he was five. His father rarely came around during his childhood and his mother was unemployed for several years, leaving the family with “no income” and “only food stamps” to rely on. By the age of 17, Zakary was “bouncing around” and staying with his sister, girlfriend, and friend. He had his first daughter at 19, and had two more children by a different mother.

Zakary has not had contact with his oldest daughter for about three years, but he sees and talks to his two youngest children regularly. Zakary struggled with drinking—especially after the death of his child at birth—but cleaned up and now lives in stable housing.

Zakary enrolled at Urban Ventures (UV) to become a better father and improve his relationship with his children. He developed a deep connection with program staff who had first-hand knowledge of what he was facing. He explained how the program:

... helped me out a lot because ... I was listening to so many people talk about the mistakes they made. And then, there was a couple of guys [from the staff] that would sit in there and talk ... just some down-to-earth brothers that I respected. Everybody in there I respect. And I liked it because ... they’re taking the time out to ... really push some people forward.

He connected with multiple staff members and drew inspiration from their stories. Hearing about how staff had faced similar challenges and turned their lives around motivated him to make changes too. Zakary described one of the staff members at UV:

I looked at that brother they got up there. He said he been to prison and everything. But I looked at his life, how much he changed. I’m like, this man has been to prison but he’s sitting here teaching a class on parenting. I’m like, that just shows you the power of the human nature, our spirit. You can do anything you want to do. You just got to push.

Zakary felt that UV had an “enormous” impact on his life. He recounted how the a 60-year-old staff member at UV still recalled how his father abused his mother. This made him realize that his own children still have a chance to remember how he changed his ways as a parent. Zakary tells his kids, “Listen, I’m not perfect but I’m changing for y’all. I’m changing for myself and for y’all.”

and constructive feedback from other group members and staff. Some described their groups as “fun.” When discussing their motivations for sticking with the program, a quarter of fathers mentioned the groups as their main motivator.

Fathers also valued the RF program staff. The large majority of participants offered an example of a positive interaction with at least one staff member, usually their case manager, a person they felt they could go to repeatedly. Some fathers described their relationships with their case managers as an “open door” to get help on a variety of issues. Many fathers in this group said they felt supported by their case managers and felt these staff members cared about their well-being. Some fathers told interviewers they appreciated the consistent check-ins (by phone or in person) from their case managers even after they completed the program.

Group facilitators were described in similar ways, as overwhelmingly supportive and caring. Some fathers pointed to the personal dynamism of their facilitators, and liked their use of humor and personal stories. This made classes enjoyable and the content easier to comprehend. A few fathers told interviewers they appreciated that facilitators did not talk down to them and treated them with respect. Several other fathers discussed how facilitators often spent extra time with them outside of the group working on their various issues.

For example, Duane described his relationship with the facilitators at Urban Ventures in this way:

Yeah, these guys know how to crack jokes and they're knowledgeable and they . . . understand the magnitude of the problem. They're passionate about trying to help people, especially young people. . . . So, if you sit there . . . you learn from these people that have personal experience and who are really dedicated to this, been through this. They're not only teaching theoretical stuff, they've actually got personal experience that they can actually relate to whatever they're trying to teach people. Their delivery method is beautiful. They have a sense of humor about the whole thing.

Most fathers described other staff positively, using adjectives such as “respectful,” “knowledgeable,” “honest,” “humorous,” “compassionate,” “positive,” “straightforward,” “passionate,” and “connected to the community.” Some fathers also said staff had “street cred,” which made them easier to relate to. Many in this group told interviewers that staff members gave them hope because they too had to overcome barriers. As described in the box on the next page, program staff at Urban Ventures motivated Zakary to make changes in his life. A few noted how staff would often work together to address issues. Several fathers also credited program staff as their primary motivation for continuing with the program.

### C. Why some fathers dropped out

Some said they would have continued [in the program] had it not been for work-related scheduling conflicts.

About a third of the fathers discussed why they did not finish the program or take part in certain aspects of it. Some said they would have continued had it not been for work-related scheduling conflicts. Juan stopped attending because “I started work[ing] seven days a week and I didn’t have time to go to their . . . meetings.” Similarly, Emmett explained, “The reason I wasn’t able to meet the [attendance] guidelines was for a positive thing because I was employed.”

Others cited their busy schedules. For example, Hareem, a 39-year-old, had three of his children move in with him and his mother. He explained:

I didn’t get a chance to complete it [Connections to Success] all the way because I had got my kids, I was in the process of putting them in school and running back and forth. . . . I had to catch the bus over to Missouri to the class. . . . I couldn’t make it over there and make it here and make it there on time.

Very few fathers said that they had been asked to leave the program or stopped going because they were dissatisfied with it. Two fathers told interviewers they left because they did not see the benefit of the program or could accomplish the same things on their own. Two other fathers felt too ashamed to participate in groups due to their difficult life circumstances. One of these men told interviewers he did not return to the program because he had too little money for proper clothes or to maintain hygiene and felt embarrassed to show up.

### D. Fathers’ ideas for RF program improvements

Most fathers struggled to come up with a response when asked to suggest how to improve the RF program. In fact, when first asked, two-thirds of the fathers indicated they couldn’t think of anything that could improve it. Some added that the programs were “already doing all they can do.” When probed, about 40 percent of fathers were able to offer suggestions ranging from more help in finding better-paying jobs to more legal assistance and help obtaining stable, affordable housing.

#### Better job search and job placement services

A few fathers, particularly older men, were disappointed that the program mainly referred clients to low-wage, entry-level, or temporary jobs. Jayden, who is 40, described the RF job developer he worked with as “okay but . . . they’re shooting too low [for] me. They only have custodian and kitchen jobs and things. . . . You go to the job club and you apply but they send you through a lot of temps too. That’s what I’m doing, working temp positions.”



Fifty-year-old Juan had similar thoughts about a different RF program:

I think their job leads sucked. [They] tried to send me to \$8.00 an hour job busting my . . . back, [I'm] like 'No that ain't me. I'm better than that . . . I'm not going to work for \$8.00 an hour. You can kiss my ass.' I'm sorry to say that . . . but I mean I'm just telling you the answer [to] your question.

For J.T., a 48-year-old, it wasn't so much his pride that was challenged by the job leads, it was the impossibility of supporting a child on \$8 an hour:

Helping somebody, to me, is not finding them an \$8-an-hour job to raise their daughter. You can't raise your daughter on \$8 an hour. You might as well not have a job. I mean really, you can't do it. It's ludicrous to even ask me to take a job like that.

### Expanded legal services

Some fathers expressed that they had hoped for or expected more in the way of individualized legal assistance than they received.

Some fathers expressed that they had hoped for or expected more in the way of individualized legal assistance than they received. In particular, though they often sought to obtain legal representation when they went to court regarding custody or visitation/parenting time, such help was seldom available. A few fathers told interviewers that they were unable to utilize program legal services because they could not afford them, even at a reduced rate or sliding scale, while others said they made too much money to qualify.

Jayden expressed his frustration over not being able to access an attorney through the RF program:

What was missing [from the program that he would have valued]? . . . More legal help to get people on the right track of their child support and things and explain it. They had this forum where they brought in the child support case workers . . . and you go in there and you talk to them and you tell them what your situation is. "Oh, you need an attorney." You know? It's like, "I don't have the money for an attorney." . . . Everybody's, "Oh you need an attorney to help you with it." Then what I am here for? Y'all are wasting my time then because I already knew I needed an attorney. I came here to see if there was anything I could [do], [if] I can go get the forms myself, you know, do whatever I can to help myself. Like I said, the system is just so messed up.

Quincy, a 35-year-old father of four, expressed similar frustrations over not being able to obtain legal assistance through the RF program:

I was hoping they would help me pay for a lawyer or have some lawyers represent me to help me see my children. They say they don't have lawyers to go with you to court, but they can help me write out papers myself to modify [my order]. That seemed to be a little overwhelming. [I wish] I would have a lawyer to do everything to help me get visitation for my children.

### **Assistance finding affordable housing**

A handful of fathers thought that housing assistance was offered through the RF program and expressed frustration over what the RF programs actually offered once they enrolled. Other than referring men to shelters and other community organizations that could potentially assist, the programs themselves did little to help men secure better housing. Jamar told interviewers that housing assistance was the one thing the RF program could improve:

I thought like after you get a job they'd help you get like an apartment or something, or help you get on low income [housing] or help you to squeeze in to get you a little crib so you could go ahead and get some type of joint custody or have a place for yourself where you could bring your baby or whatnot, or you could start you a life. I thought they'd help you get that type of housing. But when they was talking about housing they was actually talking about shelters and stuff like that, and I don't need no shelter, I need a whole place.

Marquis, from the FATHER Project, expressed a similar sentiment:

I . . . saw what they were trying to do. They're helpful. But I expected a lot more, especially when it said help with housing. I thought they could get me in somewhere. I'm homeless. You know what I'm saying? Something. Maybe because I'm with them I can get into an apartment or something like that. Then when I asked, they were just like, "We can refer you to places." I was like, "Refer? That's a whole different thing." They gave the perception that they could help more than they really could.

### **Additional suggestions and feedback**

Aside from the common themes noted above, fathers had an assortment of suggestions and concerns. Some saw a need to address transportation issues, others wished for more intense services or services in a wider variety of geographic locations or in a better physical space, as some programs were crowded. Two fathers who participated in the Fathers' Support Center did not respond positively to the program's "boot camp" approach and wanted less strict program rules. They felt program staff were too strict with rules and that facilitators often delivered content in a too harsh manner. These complaints, however, were the exception; other fathers at the Fathers' Support Center specifically said they appreciated the structured nature of the program.

A few fathers said that their former or current partners should be involved in the program. These fathers felt that the program could go a long way toward helping them resolve their differences with the mothers of their children—one father even said the program should view itself as “the intercessor.” Here are the words of another father, D’angelo:

I learned one thing; they need a program for the women. . . . The thing is I kind of wish that . . . both of [my children’s mothers] would take the program. Because they’ll not only learn about what men are going through, they’ll learn about themselves too, and be able to get a job, you know. I think they do have that kind of a program, but I just wish that my child’s moms would take that program.

Tyrese, a participant at Fathers’ Support Center, shared this view:

Well, since that’s a program that’s strictly about men, I was going to say they’re missing the woman component. . . . During the parenting section, if they can have the women come in and actually sit with [us fathers] and actually learn shit that we learn in there, I think it would be better for both parents.

## Conclusion

The fathers gained valuable knowledge from RF programs and received help across a range of domains, from parenting skills to employment services to assistance with child support issues. These are precisely the types of challenges that are most pressing for these fathers, and the stated reasons why many of them entered these programs in the first place. On another level, the programs also reinforced the idea that fathers’ contribution as parents is valuable and necessary for their children, a message that counteracts much of the negative and discouraging communication they receive through the larger culture and often from their children’s mothers. According to fathers’ suggestions for program improvement, there was a need for better job placement services and legal assistance. Perhaps the biggest challenges these fathers face is gaining greater access to their children and improving the co-parenting relationship with the children’s mothers.

## VIII. CONCLUSIONS



This study has demonstrated the stresses and yearnings felt by 87 fathers who participated in Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs across four cities. In their own voices, these men present a rich portrait of low-income, nonresident fathers whose lives are too often reduced to one-dimensional, unflattering stereotypes. The fathers' stories make it clear that these men are motivated to become better fathers and to improve their lives—and that they face a host of interrelated life challenges that stand in their way. These fathers' life stories underscore the complexity of these challenges. In this chapter we highlight the key themes and findings that emerged and consider their policy and programmatic implications.

### A. Key themes and findings

**Fathers' narratives underscore the fact that low-income fathers often enroll in RF programs because they long to be more engaged in their children's lives.** These fathers viewed “being there” as a core part of responsible fatherhood and sought to give their children a better life than they had. The motivation to be an active force in their children's lives sometimes stemmed from their desire to compensate for the absence of their own fathers, or for the neglectful, traumatic, and sometimes abusive early experiences they had suffered themselves.

**Fatherhood could and did transform many men's outlook on life and provided a catalyst for making positive changes in their lives.** The family instability that many men experienced in childhood led some to join gangs and sell drugs as youth, and the large majority of fathers had a history of incarceration. But at some point after these men became fathers—either when their children were born or later in their children's

lives—they realized they were no longer just living for themselves. As a result, fathers felt the need to “slow down” and leave behind the negative influences of their past to fully embrace their role as fathers. Fathers’ narratives also make clear that fatherhood is an evolving process. Many who say they failed to engage in the father role when their children were younger, or became disengaged over time, came to the RF program out of a new or renewed desire to claim the fatherhood role.



**Fathers described childhoods affected by poverty and family instability.** There is one common factor across the majority of men that made it difficult for them to fully become the parents they wanted to be for their children: their own troubled childhoods and lack of positive family role models. Many of the men we interviewed had fathers who were absent or minimally involved in their lives, and some of the men described early exposure to substance abuse and violence. The mothers of the men were generally a more consistent presence in their lives, but some of these mothers struggled with personal challenges that affected their ability to parent. The men we interviewed had mixed experiences with their mothers’ new partners or husbands—some served as father figures for them while others were physically or emotionally abusive.

**The most common barrier to fathers’ continued involvement with their children was the ongoing contentious relationship with the mothers of their children.** Conflict and instability pervaded men’s relationships with their children’s mothers, often from the beginning. Highly volatile relationships, and often highly conflictual breakups, cast a long shadow, constraining the parents’ ability to cooperate in ways that allowed the father to play a parenting role. A byproduct of these contentious relationships was gatekeeping by the children’s mothers, which limited fathers’ access to their children.

**While some fathers had positive co-parenting relationships with the mothers of their children, most did not.** Fathers described mothers who restricted physical access to their children, who left entirely without providing contact information, or who were erratic in their willingness to let fathers see their children. Mothers acted as gatekeepers in more indirect ways too—refusing to communicate with fathers or to share important information about the child.

**Fathers faced formidable, interrelated life challenges that also hindered greater involvement with their children.** Fathers in the study were attempting to set their lives on a more stable path and fulfill their roles as fathers more effectively amidst severe and deeply interrelated life challenges. Past and ongoing interactions with the criminal justice system intersected with many of these challenges. Spells of incarceration often limited fathers' physical access at critical points in their children's early life course; and past felonies sharply limited men's employment opportunities and their ability to secure housing. Most fathers struggled to maintain employment, and even working fathers had difficulty making ends meet because they could find only low-wage jobs, were often given only limited hours, or managed to land only temporary work. To add to these challenges, over half of these fathers were unstably housed, and child support obligations often created additional financial burden. The fathers commonly volunteered information about past alcohol and substance abuse issues; some fathers were still early into their recovery, and others might have chosen not to talk about their current addiction struggles. The combined stress of these factors limited men's ability to remain employed, remain housed, and maintain contact with their children.

**Fathers' desire to become better fathers and to secure a job motivated them to enroll in the RF programs, and they valued the services they received.** Fathers responded positively to RF programs because they wanted to be more involved in their children's lives and had reached a point where becoming a father, or choosing to reengage in the father role, had motivated or strengthened their resolve to change. Many fathers came to a deeper understanding of how important their involvement with their children was, and they described learning practical parenting skills, such as how to communicate more effectively with their children. On the employment front, fathers received help developing resumes, completing applications, and preparing for interviews; they also obtained information about job openings.

**The ability of RF programs to connect fathers to "men like me" is part of what makes these programs relevant and valuable to the fathers.** Men's narratives indicate that they highly valued connecting with other fathers who like themselves were seeking to make positive changes and with staff who had made those changes. This aspect makes the programs "genuine" for participants and encourages and reinforces their motivation to change.





## **B. Implications for responsible fatherhood policy and program design**

The findings summarized above suggest that the core services required by RF grant conditions—parenting and fatherhood, economic stability, and relationships—have tremendous potential to better fathers’ lives and enhance their children’s well-being. The in-depth interview findings suggest a variety of policies and strategies that could potentially strengthen RF programs’ ability to help low-income fathers like those described in this report.

### **Improving fathers’ access to their children**

Although fathers said that they valued and learned a great deal from the RF program parenting component, the fact that so many had little to no contact with at least one of their children limited the extent to which these parenting skills could be put into practice. Because most of the fathers were never married to the mothers of their children, they typically came to the RF program lacking a visitation or parenting time agreement and lacked the requisite knowledge to navigate the legal system on their own or resources to engage a lawyer. About a quarter of the men said they received information about parenting time or custody issues from the RF programs, but most fathers did not live with their children and desired greater access and more involvement with them.

RF programs can play an important role in helping fill this unmet service need. A useful first step would be to more proactively help fathers obtain court-ordered parenting time agreements, including forging stronger partnerships with the courts to facilitate this process. Because many fathers wanted or appeared to need more individualized legal

assistance to successfully negotiate custody and parenting time issues, a corollary step would be to devote more programmatic resources to providing access to pro bono or other low-cost attorneys and related legal services to help fathers obtain parenting time agreements. These two efforts could be useful in laying the legal groundwork for fathers' access to their children. A parenting time agreement may not always be appropriate, however, so domestic violence safeguards must continue to be included as a critical element of any strategy designed to increase parenting time for fathers.

### **Offering stronger and more comprehensive co-parenting and relationship skills services**

Many men reported conflict-ridden relationships with their children's mothers. This conflict often directly interfered with their ability to have contact with their children, and triggered deep anger and frustration. The problems fathers face maintaining access to their children because of relationship conflict and mothers' gatekeeping behaviors suggests that more attention needs to be paid to co-parenting and addressing challenges faced by parents in high-conflict relationships. The prevalence of fathers' volatile relationships with the mothers of their children suggests the need for co-parenting services to emphasize strategies for anger management, positive communication skills, and conflict resolution. In addition, co-parenting services should include access to mediation and counseling services in order to reduce relationship conflict and increase father involvement.

Although participation in relationship skills building is low compared to participation in parenting skills building, encouraging willing former partners to participate with the fathers in the co-parenting component of the program could provide an important opportunity to develop a positive co-parenting relationship. Programmatic efforts to provide relationship skill building services to fathers' current partners should continue to be encouraged, as these relationships often produce children, yet are highly likely to dissolve. The tensions in these more recent relationships can also rebound with negative consequences for a man's relationship to a child from an earlier union.

### **Augmenting employment services**

While fathers generally provided positive feedback about the job readiness and job search skills they obtained through the RF programs, the employment challenges these men typically face are significant. Most were still struggling to find steady employment, earn enough to make ends meet, and meet their child support obligations. Although these fathers faced a myriad of barriers to gaining and maintaining employment, the most commonly cited obstacle was fathers' past incarceration and criminal records. These findings suggest that the economic stability component of RF programs may need to be strengthened to improve the chances that fathers will be successful at securing good jobs with steady and adequate wages. Any employment approach should include assistance in expunging or sealing criminal records when possible.

### **Increasing RF program collaboration with the child support and court systems.**

Each RF program in this study provides some programming to help fathers develop as individuals and to assist them in navigating the child support system. But child support orders generally exceeded fathers' ability to pay, and most with child support orders had accumulated child support arrears, sometimes in large amounts. Despite the financial burden that child support placed on these low-income fathers, only a few fathers indicated that they received child support assistance from the RF programs that led to a downward modification of their child support order or a reduction in their arrears. Fathers in these programs could benefit from more intensive one-on-one efforts to navigate both the child support and court systems. Providing additional on-site child support and legal assistance could help ensure that more fathers with child support orders have their cases reviewed and that the necessary steps are taken to adjust their orders, reduce arrears whenever possible and appropriate, and reduce the likelihood that fathers are jailed for nonpayment of child support.

### **Expanding and intensifying supplementary services**

While fathers' interactions with many systems and institutions in society—child support, the legal and criminal justice systems, social services—are either negative or meager in their assistance, men view the RF program positively. They see it as a safe and supportive place that understands their challenges, validates their efforts to be more engaged fathers, and helps them address at least some of their challenges. RF programs are uniquely positioned to work with fathers to identify their needs and link them to other services. They can, as one father quoted earlier put it, “connect the dots” for these men in constructive ways.

The range and severity of challenges faced by these fathers are such that additional services may be needed in conjunction with the three core RF components and child support service needs noted above. For example, many fathers struggled to find a stable and secure place to live, and many ended up living with family and friends, in a shelter, or on the streets. Arrests for minor offenses could wreak havoc in fathers' lives, and create a cycle of negative effects, including job loss, additional debt, and increased economic insecurity. In addition, one out of three fathers described experiencing emotional and mental health issues. Some of these services may not be fundable through the funding stream supporting RF programs. These additional services include:

- Finding stable and affordable housing opportunities, particularly to facilitate visitation

- Obtaining legal assistance for issues beyond child support, such as probation or parole requirements, outstanding warrants, court fees, fines, tickets, and suspended drivers' licenses
- Gaining access to mental health and counseling services

In sum, RF programs speak to men's desires to transform their lives and become more engaged fathers. They can be suitable for fathers at different points in the life course, starting with preventative approaches aimed at informing and equipping young men before they have embarked on fatherhood. They can address the needs of young fathers in the early stages of forming first-time families, and fathers in prison or newly reentering society. For men who want to turn their life around and be the kind of father they never had, programs such as the four included in this study can offer men supports and skills to improve their chances at what they want most—to ensure their children do not make the same mistakes they did, and to give their children and themselves a brighter future.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **METHODS TO SELECT PARTICIPANTS FOR PACT IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS**

This appendix provides a detailed description of how we selected fathers for the qualitative study. Because the fathers who were interviewed for the qualitative study are both a subset of fathers eligible for the qualitative study and a subset of all fathers participating in the overall Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation, we compare the characteristics of these three groups of fathers. We also describe how much time fathers in the qualitative study spent engaged in Responsible Fatherhood (RF) program activities, because participation level was one criterion used to define eligibility for the in-depth interviews.

### **A. Sample of fathers who engaged in program activities**

We identified a sample of fathers for the qualitative study who had engaged in the RF programs. Fathers who participated in the PACT RF programs between the months of December 2012 and October 2013 were eligible for the study.<sup>12</sup> We excluded fathers who enrolled in one of the four RF site programs but participated in fewer than two workshop sessions (on any topic, including workshop sessions on parenting, relationships, or employment). Focusing on fathers who participated in at least two workshops ensured that we could understand their experiences in the RF programs in the broader context of their lives. We also excluded fathers who only had children age 19 and older (109 fathers), did not provide a telephone number where they could be reached (in the baseline survey) (34 fathers), and those for whom English was a second language (22 fathers).

We used a sampling approach that ensured a mix of fathers who had moderate and high levels of participation. First, we ranked eligible fathers (i.e., those who had participated in two or more workshops) based on the number of workshops they participated in for any program component activity (i.e., parenting, relationship, or employment workshops). Then, within each site, we grouped fathers by their level of participation. A “high degree” of participation was defined as being at or above the 75th percentile of participation in each site.<sup>13</sup> A “moderate degree” of participation was defined as being below the 75th percentile of participation in each site. Next, we randomly ordered fathers within each group and recruited them until the slots were filled. Because program participation varied substantially across the four RF programs (see Section C of this appendix), we used a relative threshold rather than an absolute one to define high and moderate participation within each site.

Table A.1 shows the number of fathers who were in the original sample, scheduled for an interview, and ultimately interviewed, by participation status. From the 611 fathers who were identified as eligible for the qualitative study (attended at least two workshops of any kind) based on the evaluation’s participant tracking management information system, we scheduled interviews with 123 men. The team completed 93 interviews for an overall completion rate of 76 percent. Six interviews were dropped from the sample due to audio difficulties or other circumstances that compromised the interviews, such as the father bringing his children to the interview. This resulted in a final sample of 87 fathers in the analysis.

## B. Similarity of interviewed fathers to broader samples of PACT study fathers

We compared the background characteristics of the 87 fathers interviewed for the qualitative study to:

1. the original sample of 611 fathers eligible for the qualitative study: this provides information on whether the fathers who were scheduled and interviewed differed from the original sample of fathers identified for the qualitative study (i.e., fathers who participated in at least two workshops); and

**Table A.1. Fathers interviewed by RF program site and level of participation**

	Full sample	Scheduled for interview	No-show for interview	Completed interview
<b>Goodwill-Easter Seals<sup>a</sup></b>				
High	26	11	1	10
Moderate	88	23	7	16
Total	114	34	8	26
<b>Urban Ventures</b>				
High	27	9	2	7
Moderate	77	8	1	7
Special	44	8	2	6
Total	148	25	5	20
<b>Connections to Success</b>				
High	23	11	0	11
Moderate	58	18	7	11
Total	81	29	7	22
<b>Fathers' Support Center</b>				
High	71	15	6	9
Moderate	197	20	4	16
Total	268	35	10	25
<b>All Sites</b>				
High	147	46	9	37
Moderate	420	69	19	50
Special	44	8	2	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>611</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>93</b>

Note: Final N = 87 due to 6 interviews that were dropped from the sample.

<sup>a</sup> Goodwill-Easter Seals is referred to in the main report by the name of its RF program: the FATHER Project.

2. the full sample of fathers participating in the PACT evaluation: although we did not select the qualitative study sample to be representative of the full PACT evaluation sample, the second comparison makes clear whether the interviewed fathers ultimately differed from the full sample of fathers in the evaluation.

Table A.2 shows that the fathers interviewed for the PACT qualitative study have demographic and socioeconomic characteristics that are similar to those of both the original qualitative study sample and the full PACT evaluation sample. There were no statistically significant differences between the characteristics of interviewed fathers and the other two groups of fathers.

**Table A.2. Characteristics of PACT fathers: Qualitative study interviewees, qualitative study sample frame, full PACT evaluation sample**

	Qualitative study fathers interviewed	Qualitative study sample frame	Full PACT evaluation sample <sup>a</sup>
<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>			
Average age (years)	34	35	35
Black (non-Hispanic) (%)	84	83	81
White (non-Hispanic) (%)	9	7	8
Hispanic (%)	3	4	5
American Indian or Alaska Native (%)	1	1	1
Asian (%)	0	< 1	< 1
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (%)	0	< 1	< 1
Other race (%)	2	4	5
<b>Socioeconomic Status (%)</b>			
Highest level of education			
High school diploma	43	44	42
GED	20	18	19
Any postsecondary	15	8	8
Recent paid work (in past month)	52	51	50
Earnings in last 30 days			
No earnings	48	49	50
\$1–\$500	24	29	27
\$501–\$1,000	13	11	12
More than \$1,001	15	11	11

	Qualitative study fathers interviewed	Qualitative study sample frame	Full PACT evaluation sample <sup>a</sup>
<b>Housing Stability (%)</b>			
Stable housing			
Own home	5	3	2
Rent home	25	24	26
Contribute to rent	15	19	18
Unstable housing			
Live rent-free	33	33	30
Live in half-way or group house, treatment facility	9	9	10
Homeless (e.g., in shelter, on the streets, in an abandoned building/car)	8	8	10
Live in other unstable housing	5	4	4
<b>Criminal History</b>			
Ever arrested (%)	95	91	91
Ever convicted of a crime (%)	78	72	73
Currently on parole (%)	31	35	34
Longest time in adult correctional institution (years)	1.8	1.6	1.7
<b>Child Support</b>			
Have legal child support arrangement (%)	58	66	58
Average amount paid in last 30 days <sup>b</sup>	\$169	\$144	\$149
<b>Psychological Well-Being</b>			
At risk for moderate to severe depression (%) <sup>c</sup>	28	28	27
Sample size	87	611	4,734

Source: PACT baseline survey.

Note: None of the differences between the characteristics of the fathers interviewed and those of the other two samples of fathers are statistically significant at the 0.05 level: The percentage of fathers by race does not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

<sup>a</sup>The full PACT evaluation sample includes all fathers, from both the treatment and control groups, who had completed the baseline survey through August 22, 2014.

<sup>b</sup>This average includes fathers who reported paying \$0 in child support in the last month.

<sup>c</sup>As measured by the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8; Kroenke et al. 2009). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) uses the PHQ-8 to assess the prevalence of depressive symptoms among individuals who live above and below the poverty level (Pratt and Brody 2014).



### C. Variation in program participation across sites

The qualitative study sample includes fathers who engaged in RF program services by participating in at least two RF program workshops. To better understand the nature of fathers' participation, Table A.3 describes the amount of time that interviewed fathers spent in different content areas: parenting/fatherhood, economic stability, relationships, personal development, and other content. The table includes participation in workshop sessions, one-on-one assistance, and other group activities. The data are from the study's site management information system.

The amount of participation in RF program activities varied widely across the four programs. Overall, fathers in the qualitative study participated in 62 hours of program activities, on average. But fathers at the Fathers' Support Center participated in over 140 hours of content, compared to 48 hours for fathers in Connections to Success, 26 hours at the FATHER Project, and 14 hours at Urban Ventures. While fathers at Fathers' Support Center spent the most time in economic stability activities (77 hours), they had more hours of participation in all four of the main content areas. With a few exceptions, fathers' participation in the other sites tended to be spread across the various content areas. Parenting/fatherhood activities were the most common for fathers at Connections to Success and Urban Ventures. Across all sites except Urban Ventures, fathers tended to spend less time in activities focused on relationships with their children's mothers.

**Table A.3. Average hours fathers in the qualitative study attended RF program activities**

Content	Fathers' Support Center	Connections to Success	Goodwill-Easter Seals <sup>a</sup>	Urban Ventures	Overall
Parenting/fatherhood	18	16	6	7	12
Economic stability	77	13	2	1	26
Relationships	19	6	4	6	9
Personal development	24	13	7	0	12
Other content	3	0	7	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>62</b>
Number of fathers	25	21	22	19	87

Source: Data from PACTIS/site management information system.

Note: Sites began PACT intake between December 9, 2012, and February 13, 2013. The analysis includes fathers' participation in core workshops, individual contacts that lasted five or more minutes and did not occur by mail or leaving a message, and any other program services. Each attended activity was coded into one content area. Other content includes needs assessments and addressing such issues as substance abuse, domestic violence, emergency needs, housing, legal services, clothing, food, utility assistance, health and wellness, medical services, and transportation.

<sup>a</sup> Goodwill-Easter Seals is referred to in the main report by the name of its RF program: the FATHER Project.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **PACT QUALITATIVE STUDY METHODS**

The Parents and Children Together (PACT) qualitative study was designed and implemented using rigorous qualitative research methods. We present here a detailed description of these methods, including development of the in-depth interview protocol, collection of interview data, and a multistage approach for analyzing data from the in-depth interviews that led to the identification of the key themes and findings presented in this report.

### **A. Development of interview protocol**

Researchers with extensive experience conducting qualitative interviews and ethnographic work with low-income fathers created a detailed interview protocol to ensure that interviewers systematically covered topics related to the three main study goals described in Chapter 1: (1) to explore the lives and perceptions of the men who enroll in RF programs, (2) to examine how these men view themselves as fathers and their attitudes toward fatherhood, and (3) to understand what motivated these men to participate in the RF programs and how the programs fit into the broader context of their experiences. The interview protocol was developed through a collaborative and iterative process that included several layers of review and incorporated feedback from experts in the field. We pre-tested the protocol on a small group of fathers who were not included in the qualitative study, and revised the protocol based on an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses from the pre-test.

The in-depth interview protocol differs from a survey because it has open-ended questions and is designed to be conversational (see Appendix C for the full protocol). The interview protocol is not a script to be followed verbatim, nor does it pose closed-ended questions. Within each topic area, the protocol's open-ended questions allow a range of responses, and also allow fathers to share their stories and beliefs in their own words. These open-ended questions are followed by a variety of probes designed to encourage fathers to elaborate in greater detail on topics of particular interest to the study. Probes, instead of direct questions, preserve the conversational nature of the interview.

The exact order of the questions, the extent to which follow-up probes were employed, and the amount of time the interviewees spent responding to questions all varied in practice, and the interviews were primarily respondent-led within each topic area. The interview's conversational style allowed interviewers to develop rapport with the fathers, which in turn led interview participants to feel more comfortable sharing their perceptions and experiences. The interview protocol included questions that were relevant to each of the study goals. For example, to better understand the men's attitudes toward fatherhood, we asked questions such as "What do you think makes for a good father?", "What is the best part of being a dad?", "What is the toughest part of being a dad?", and "What do you think your life would be like if you hadn't had your children?"

To gather information about a father's family ties and the relationships within the father's innermost circle, we developed a tool called the Family Network Tree (FNT) specifically for PACT (see Chapter II of this report for examples of FNTs). During the course of each interview, interviewers worked with fathers to hand-draw on a blank sheet of paper a present-day family tree that included their children, the children's mothers, any current partners, and anyone they lived with. Interviewers probed extensively so that fathers described the characteristics of each network tie, plus the nature of each relationship with each person in this inner family circle.

In pre-testing, researchers developed procedures to hone the FNT method, including how interviewers should use the space on the paper to draw the tree while conducting the interview, and a consistent set of symbols to capture different relationships. Once the FNT was drawn during an interview, interviewers repeatedly referred back to it in subsequent conversations to ensure that they followed up on each child, child's mother, and current partner in subsequent modules.

The FNT was seamlessly integrated into the open-ended structure of the in-depth interview, offering a visual tool to spark in-depth conversation and aid in recall. It is not a formal social network analysis, but a methodological tool most similar to a genogram (Hartman 1995). It expands the genogram method in order to capture family complexity that arises as a result of the multi-partnered fertility that is common today among disadvantaged populations in the United States. Genograms were developed as a part of the interaction between a practitioner (e.g., social worker or therapist) and a client, and they have traditionally been used as a way for practitioners to keep track of their client's often-traditional nuclear families. The FNT is different in that it allows interviewers to track, and interviewees to describe, more complex family structures.

The interview protocol was designed to collect information about fathers' involvement and relationships with all of their children. For example, we identify all of a father's biological children when creating the FNT and ask questions about where each child lives, who each child lives with, and how often the father sees the child. We also asked the father to describe their current relationship with each child, how often they see each child, the ways they stay connected with each child, and any barriers to staying connected with each child. For the child the father is most involved with, we asked more detailed questions about how they spend their time with the child.

### **Pre-testing interview protocol**

Once the interview protocol was drafted, it was pre-tested at the Center for Urban Families (CFUF) in Baltimore with nine fathers. The fathers, recruited with the help of the CFUF's director, provided informed consent and were compensated in the same manner as study participants. The study leaders and interviewers all participated in the pre-test, taking turns in the roles of interviewers and observers. One person

conducted each pre-test interview, while two people observed and tracked how much time was spent covering different topics and sections of the protocol. Observers unobtrusively noted the strengths and weaknesses of the interview guide. After the interview, the pre-test interviewers and observers debriefed with each father about what they liked and did not like about the interview, and whether there were questions that were especially useful for generating discussion, were confusing, or made them uncomfortable. After the father left the room, the interviewer and observers debriefed once again, sharing their notes about what seemed to work and where the protocol needed improvement.

Based on the experience of the pre-tests, the team came to a consensus about which areas of the guide needed to be reworked. The guide was then revised and streamlined to make it as concise as possible while still eliciting detailed responses.

### **Interviewer training**

All interviewers, even team members with decades of experience conducting similar types of in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations with fathers, participated in a full two-day, in-person training session led by the co-investigators and consultants. The training was intensive and comprehensive, covering the study goals, the content and flow of the interview protocol, interviewing techniques, and field logistics related to scheduling and conducting the interviews.

Interviewers practiced how to elicit rich information from fathers—by hearing and respecting their points of view, listening actively, and posing questions in a neutral, nonjudgmental manner. For example, interviewers were taught to ask fathers “how” something occurred and to evoke detailed narratives with questions such as “Tell me the story about that,” “What happened then?” and “Where do things stand now?”—an approach that typically yields detailed sequences of events leading up to a given outcome.

Interviewers practiced these skills, both in pairs and in round-robin fashion with the entire interview team. Each team member had an opportunity to role-play an interview with a “father” who was being played by one of the senior consultants on the team. Interviewers were randomly assigned different modules within the guide to role-play and strove to put the best practices they had learned into action. Each role-play segment lasted about 5–10 minutes; then each member of the study team provided feedback to the interviewer in an effort to improve his or her interviewing style. Each interviewer had multiple opportunities to role-play throughout the two-day training. As part of this training exercise, interviewers role-played how they would ask questions and work with the father to create a hand-drawn FNT, and they practiced using the FNT as a springboard for asking additional questions about the nature and quality of their relationships with their children and current and former partners, as well as about other topics of interest to the study.

## **B. Data collection**

Data collection requires a significant amount of organization and scheduling to ensure that respondents and interviewers are in the right place at the right time. This section details our methodology for scheduling and meeting fathers for interviews, including where interviews took place, what payments were provided, and the amount of contact fathers received around each interview.

### **Interview venues and scheduling**

Interviews were conducted in locations easily accessible to fathers via public transportation, such as hotels, libraries, health centers, community centers, and the RF program sites themselves. The study team opted to conduct interviews in institutional settings rather than fathers' current residences out of safety and privacy concerns. Many fathers were living in high-crime neighborhoods unfamiliar to the interviewers; and the interviews, many of which occurred at night, were typically conducted one-on-one. In addition, fathers often resided in shared housing, making it difficult to find a place in the home that insured adequate privacy. Finally, some fathers living in shelters making in-home interviewing impossible.

Each location was a well-known space/building with private rooms available to conduct the interviews, such as conference rooms within hotels or separate study rooms within libraries. These private locations afforded the fathers privacy, increasing their comfort and ability to be candid in their interviews. Privacy was critical since many of the fathers became emotional during the interview or discussed painful personal matters such as childhood trauma, domestic abuse, and involvement in illegal activities.

Interviewers visited each of the sites for a five-day period. Since two RF programs (Urban Ventures and the FATHER Project) are both located in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota, interviews were conducted there in two week-long visits, one in October 2013 and one in November 2013. For interviews with fathers who had participated in the Fathers' Support Center, located in St. Louis, Missouri, or the Connections to Success program (with program sites in both Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri), interviews were scheduled over the course of five-day visits in October 2013 and in November 2013 respectively.

Interviews were scheduled by Mathematica's on-call staff at the survey operations center, who were trained in the recruiting protocol. Phone interviewers called the fathers identified for the study, and using a carefully crafted protocol, attempted to recruit them. Once a father agreed, he was scheduled for one of the open time slots during the designated week. At that time, the father could select the location of his choice from among the available options. The father received a phone reminder from the survey operations center a few days before the interviews. In addition, a FedEx

package was sent to each father containing information about the study, a reminder about the interview date and time, and a map with directions to the location and relevant public transportation information.

### **Conducting interviews**

Interviews were conducted in person and lasted two hours on average. Senior staff who had undergone rigorous training in the protocol and interviewing techniques conducted the interviews one-on-one with fathers (as discussed above). At least two interviewers were on site together, each conducting one-on-one interviews with different fathers.

While on site, the interviewer called the fathers assigned to them the night before their interviews to introduce themselves and remind fathers of the time and location. Interviewers greeted the fathers as they arrived by waiting for them in the lobby or entryway of the venue. Study team staff wore photo badges to identify themselves as part of the PACT evaluation study team.

If fathers did not show up within 15 minutes of the scheduled start time, interviewers were instructed to call the father directly on each of the numbers he had provided. If the father could not be reached the first time, the interviewer kept calling every ten minutes typically until an hour after the scheduled appointment time had passed. The names of fathers who were not reached were sent back to the survey operations center, whose staff tried to reach them and reschedule the father for an open slot later in the same week.

Before the interviews began, the fathers were reminded of the protections afforded them through the process of giving informed consent, and also given a card containing information about the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) clearance of the project. Interviewers recorded the interviews with the fathers' permission. Interviewers used two recorders, when possible, in order to minimize audio problems, such as poor quality or lost recording due to battery or other malfunctions. At the conclusion of the interview, fathers received a \$60 Visa gift card as an incentive to participate in the interview and a token of appreciation for their time. Anecdotally, interviewers were impressed by how often respondents expressed appreciation—and need—for the stipend; one father happily remarked that he was going to go right out and use it to buy his son a birthday present.

All gift payments were logged on receipts, which fathers signed to acknowledge they had received payment. After the interviews concluded, interviewers took structured field notes to provide additional context for anything that had happened or that they had observed that could not be captured on the recording. Interviewers uploaded recordings of the interviews to the Mathematica secure server as soon as possible after the interview and deleted it from the audio recorder.



## Check-in calls

Interviewers conducted check-in calls in spring of 2014 in an effort to stay in contact with fathers who had been interviewed the previous fall. Check-in calls were intended to update contact information and increase the likelihood of reaching fathers for subsequent waves of interviews. They were also intended to capture any significant changes in the father's life as well as the father's perception of how these changes might have affected his involvement with his children, his work activities, or his involvement with the RF program.

The interviewer who conducted the telephone check-in calls was usually the same person who had conducted the in-depth interview, which helped to maintain and increase rapport. However, due to some staff turnover, in some cases a different researcher replaced the original. On average the calls lasted about 5–10 minutes, and the team was successful in reaching about 60 percent of the fathers interviewed in the first round. The information collected from these calls was not used for this report.

## C. Analytic methods

Narrative analysis is a powerful tool for describing important contextual details and for suggesting interconnections between past and current circumstances that may shape fathers' perceptions and behavior. While the in-depth interviews resemble semistructured conversations, we applied systematic, consistent analytic methods to translate the interviews into research findings.

### Thematic coding

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim producing approximately 50 pages of text per interview, yielding over 4,200 pages of text altogether. A codebook was developed to guide the first round of thematic coding. The thematic codebook was developed by the lead coder and co-investigators using both deductive analytic techniques (i.e., derived from the research questions) and inductive (or "open") analytic techniques.

Data were coded in Atlas.ti, a software package developed for analyzing qualitative data. The initial coding structure was determined deductively (i.e., derived a priori from the research questions) although there was room for codes to be developed inductively. Deductive codes were predetermined by the research questions and the interview protocol. For example, the code "Dad Highs and Lows" was developed from the questions in the protocol: "What is the best part of being a dad?" and "What is the toughest part of being a dad?" Inductive codes "bubble up" from the data. For example, coders found that fathers repeatedly discussed the feeling that mothers or other caretakers were intentionally putting up barriers to keep them from seeing and interacting with their children. The code "Gatekeeping" was added to the codebook

from this inductive process. In the first round of coding, we primarily used deductive codes. The resulting thematic codes in the codebook connected large sections of data with common topics or themes.

Once a thematic codebook was developed, the entire coding team applied it to three randomly selected transcripts. Coders flagged sections of text that they were unsure how to code, and then met with the lead coder to systematically review the same transcript together and compare codes. Codes were adjusted as needed and additional coding decision rules were created and captured in revisions to the codebook. After this initial training, coders began coding on their own, with weekly team meetings to discuss and resolve coding ambiguities. Coders identified inductive codes once they began coding and they would discuss these codes during the weekly meetings. A lead coder supervised the coding process and independently coded 20 percent of transcripts at random for quality assurance.

### **Analytic subcoding**

Once data were sorted into thematic codes, the coding team moved on to analytic subcoding. This second stage of the coding process is synonymous with the analysis process because the patterns identified within each thematic code are identified. Just as in the thematic coding stage, analytic subcodes are inductively and deductively derived, although the team used more inductive codes than deductive codes at this stage.

The coding team generated reports on each thematic area, often combining several thematic codes associated with a larger theme. For instance, one report focused on fathers' incarceration history, so all codes related to incarceration, gangs, and illegal activity were included in the report. The coding team analyzed each thematic report, documented emergent subthemes, captured these subthemes in an Excel spreadsheet, and imported supporting quotations from the text into the spreadsheet. The spreadsheets formed the basis for internal memos summarizing the analysis of each theme and its subthemes. To ensure consistency across memos, a standard format was followed, and each report and memo was carefully reviewed by senior staff. The analysis memos served as the foundation of this qualitative report.

The Excel spreadsheets created during the analytic subcoding process were combined with data from the FNTs and the baseline survey into an Access database (i.e., at the father level) for two purposes. First, we used the Access database to pull together information about a father across multiple areas, allowing us to analyze the relationships between different aspects of fathers' lives or across different themes. For example, when writing about fathers' perspectives on fatherhood, we combined the analytic codes from that analysis with information about fathers' relationship with their own father, their employment status, and other related fields. The database also allowed us to easily retrieve the relevant quotes associated with the codes.

Second, the database allowed us to generate counts of how many fathers touched on certain themes, or to get counts for certain subsets of fathers (e.g., among fathers who had a child support order, how many talked about the role of the program in addressing child support issues). These additional analyses conducted with the Access database helped to refine the points made in the report and gave a better sense of how many fathers raised certain themes. In order to protect the identity of fathers in our study, we used pseudonyms for each father, and removed information that could be used to identify them.

Each chapter in the report represents the findings from one or more of the thematic areas that we analyzed. The internal memos described above provided the starting point for organizing and presenting the content described in each chapter. The internal memos were used in combination with data contained in the Excel analytic spreadsheets to describe the key findings. In order to capture the voices and perceptions of the fathers interviewed, we lead off each chapter with an excerpt from a quote to provide the reader with a general picture of what the chapter covers and then weave relevant quotes throughout each chapter of the report to illustrate key themes and findings.

## **APPENDIX C**

### **PACT QUALITATIVE STUDY IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE**

**Parents and Children Together (PACT)  
Qualitative Study  
In-depth Interview Guide (WAVE 1)**

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. I know you already have some information about the Parents and Children Together study, but it might be useful if I started out by giving you a bit of background and talk about why we wanted to meet with you today. As part of this national study for the Department of Health and Human Services, we are talking with men who are fathers and have been involved with programs like [PROGRAM NAME]. We want to learn first-hand from you and other men about what it is like to be a father; and about different aspects of your life that affect your views and experiences as a father—your relationships, family, important circumstances and situations, work, and your participation in [PROGRAM NAME]. We want to improve fatherhood programs, and understanding your views and experiences may help us know how to do that.

What we're going to do today is different from a formal survey or interview—it will be more like an informal conversation. I have some questions in mind, but I'm sure you will have some things to talk about too. If I raise an issue or ask a question you don't want to talk about, just let me know and we can move on. We'll plan to talk for about two hours. When we wrap-up, you will get a \$60 Visa gift card as a token of our appreciation for your time and participation.

Because we'll be talking about your perspectives and experiences, everything you say will be kept private. I will record our conversation today, but that is so I do not have to take notes and can give you my undivided attention. If you have anything you would like to say "off the record," just let me know and I can stop the recorder. If you like, you can use a fake name so that your real name is not attached to our conversation. Would you like to use your name or a made-up one for our discussion?

Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

**[Interviewer: Turn the tape recorder on.]** Okay, I have now turned the tape recorder on. Is it okay if I tape this conversation? **[Interviewer: Get verbal consent to tape on the tape recording.]**

**[Interviewer: State your name, the respondent's pseudonym (if using one), the location, and the date.]**

## I. FAMILY OF ORIGIN

1. I'm interested in learning a bit about your life when you were growing up and in getting a sense of your family.
  - 1a. Where did you grow up? What was it like? Did you move around much?
  - 1b. Who did you live with? Who took care of you the most (e.g., mother, mother/father, grandparent)?
  - 1c. Tell me a little about the relationship between your mother and father when you were born. Were they together? What was their relationship like?
  - 1d. How would you describe your family and your family life?
2. I'm especially interested in hearing more about your father. Tell me more about your relationship with your father when you were growing up.
  - 2a. Was your dad around when were you growing up?

**Interviewer: Probe for the level and pattern of presence or absence of his father, reasons for absence or variation (if any).**

- 2b. In what ways was your father there for you (e.g., emotionally, financially)? How did that make you feel?
- 2c. In what ways was he not there for you (e.g., emotionally, financially)? How did that make you feel?
- 2d. What about your father and your relationship with him when you growing up do you wish would have been different? Talk to me about that.
3. What about any other men who have been important figures in your life—for example, someone that you kind of thought of as your “father” or someone who really helped you out as you were growing up. Tell me more how this man was (these men were) like a father to you.
4. People often get their ideas about romance, marriage, and becoming a father from their parents when they are growing up. So, I'm interested in hearing what you think influenced you in this respect.
5. We have been talking a lot about your childhood. Bring me up to date. . . .
  - 5a. What is your relationship with your father like now?
  - 5b. How about your relationship with your mother?
  - 5c. <If had other people that played a parental role>: And what is your relationship with <grandmother/step-parent/etc.> now?

## II. CURRENT FAMILY NETWORK

Now I'm going to take out a piece of paper and we're going to do something you probably haven't done since the first grade: draw a family tree! I'm going to start by putting you in the middle and we will add on from there. You told me earlier that you have X kids. Is that right? And are all your children with the same mother?

**Interviewer: Repeat questions 1–3 for each child and each mother.**

1. Okay, so let's start with your (next) youngest child. What's his/her name? I'll add him right here, beneath you. How old is she/he? And his/her mom . . . what's her name? I'll include her too.
2. Tell me about [CHILD's] living situation.
  - 2a. Who does [CHILD] live with? [If he/she lives apart from father]: About how far away does [CHILD] live from you?
  - 2b. Does he/she live there all the time? . . . Does it vary? (e.g., depends on the week, month, season or some other circumstance?). <If yes>: Who else does she/he live with?
  - 2c. About how often do you see [CHILD]
3. Okay, now tell me a little bit more about [CHILD's] mother. Do you live with her/ where does she live? Are you married to her?
  - 3a. Does she have other kids than the one(s) she has with you? Where do they live? (e.g., with their mother, with their father or someone else, out on their own?)
4. Are there any children in your life that aren't yours by blood but you think of as yours . . . or who think of you as a father? Let's put them in here as well. Tell me about them. [IF YES: REPEAT QUESTIONS 1–3.]
5. Is there anyone we haven't yet talked about that you are currently in a relationship with? I'll add him/her here.
  - 5a. [If father currently has a partner]: Does [CURRENT PARTNER] live with you or someplace else?
  - 5b. Does [CURRENT PARTNER] have any children? Ok, let's add that child/ those children as well. How old are they? And do they live with [CURRENT PARTNER/you] as well? <If yes>: OK, we'll mark them down too, next to [CURRENT PARTNER].
  - 5c. [If applicable] Tell me a little bit about your relationship with her kid(s).
6. Let's add anyone else that you live with right now.



### III. FATHER INVOLVEMENT AND RELATIONSHIP WITH CHILD(REN)

Okay, now I have a much better picture of who all is in your family circle. Let's talk more about your children, starting with what it was like to become a father.

1. Let's start with your oldest child. Tell me the whole story from start to finish about how that child came to be.
  - 1a. How serious would you say your relationship with the mother was prior to pregnancy? How long were you in a relationship before she became pregnant?
  - 1b. Would you say the baby's conception was planned, accidental, or . . . somewhere in-between (e.g., unplanned but wanted, unplanned and not wanted)?
  - 1c. Tell me how you felt when you found out she was pregnant?
  - 1d. What was your relationship with the mother like during pregnancy? What about after the birth of your child?
  - 1e. Did you ever live with the mother of your/this child? (e.g., before or during pregnancy, or shortly after the birth). Tell me about that.
  - 1f. Were you able to witness the birth? What was that experience like? [IF NOT] Were you able to visit the baby in the hospital? What was that experience like?
  - 1g. How did you decide whose last name [CHILD] would have? Has it been legally established that you are the father? How did that make you feel?
2. [IF HAS MORE THAN ONE CHILD]: Now tell me what the experience was like when you became <YOUNGEST CHILD'S NAME> father?

**Interviewer: Repeat questions 3–5 below for each child, starting with the youngest. Rephrase questions as appropriate given the child's age and residence.**

3. How would you describe your relationship with [CHILD] now?
4. In general, how often do you and [CHILD] get together/spend time together? When was the last time you saw each other?

**Interviewer: Probe for the frequency/amount of time he spends with this child, presence or absence of a regular routine.**

5. Tell me about other ways you stay connected with [CHILD] (e.g., phone/texting)?
6. What kinds of things have gotten in the way of staying connected or getting even more connected/involved? Tell me about these. How does that make you feel?

Okay, now let's talk more about your relationship with your other kid(s) (Note: repeat Q3–6).

**Interviewer: Ask questions 7–9 for the child they are most involved with. If father has trouble identifying one child over another who meets this criterion (e.g., two kids with the same mother), they can talk about more than one child or just choose randomly.**

So, I'm going to switch gears now and focus on [child/ren they are most involved with].

7. Describe what it is typically like when you spend time with [CHILD].
  - 7a. What types of things do you usually do together? What kinds of things do you talk about?
  - 7b. [IF LIVING WITH CHILD]: What is your typical day with [CHILD] like?
  - 7c. [IF NOT LIVING WITH CHILD]: Where do you typically get together? (E.g., the child's mother's home/his own home/the home of his or her kin?)
8. Think back to that last time you spent time with [CHILD]. When was that? Tell me the whole story of the last time you spent some time together from start to finish.
9. If you had to name one thing that makes it hard for you to have the kind of relationship with [CHILD] that you want, what would it be? Tell me more about that.

**Interviewer: the remaining questions in this section are general. Do not ask for each child.**

10. Talk to me more about what it's like to fit in seeing your kids and being a father to them with everything else you have going on—make the arrangements and work things out with their mom, things like that? What all does that involve?
11. Is the place you currently live a good place for your children (who don't live with you) to spend time with you? Tell me more about that.

Now, I'd like you to step back a bit and talk to me about your views about fatherhood more generally and what it has meant in your life to be a father.

12. What is the best part of being a dad?
13. What is the toughest part of being a dad?
14. What do you think your life would be like if you hadn't had your children? Give me some (specific) examples of how it would be different.
15. Interviewer: Ask questions 7–9 for the child they are most involved with. If father has trouble identifying one child over another who meets this criterion (e.g., two kids with the same mother), they can talk about more than one child or just choose randomly.

#### **IV. RELATIONSHIP WITH MOTHER(S) OF CHILD(REN)/ CURRENT PARTNER**

**Interviewer: if children have different mothers, ask respondents questions 1–6 about the mother of his youngest child first. Then ask them to compare that relationship to their relationship with the mother of their oldest child. Allow for flexibility. If, for example, the child he is most involved with is neither the youngest nor oldest, you may ask him to compare his relationship with that mother instead. Adapt language to fit relationship status and living situation.**

Now I'd like to focus on your relationship with the mother of [NAME OF YOUNGEST CHILD].

1. You told me quite a bit about [CHILD'S MOTHER] earlier when we talked about when you became a father. [IF NO LONGER TOGETHER]: Why did you break up? What happened?
2. Tell me more about your relationship with [CHILD'S MOTHER] now. What is it like?
  - 2a. What aspects of the relationship do you think are good or are working well? What aspects are not?
  - 2b. What do you wish were different about the relationship?
  - 2c. What have you done over the past year to try and change things? How did that go?
3. Some moms make it hard for a dad to be involved in his child's life, others don't. How about for you?
4. Sometimes a mother supports a father's involvement for a while, but then it changes. How about for you? Tell me about that.
5. Have you done anything over the past year to try to work together better on being parents? Tell me all about that.
6. What all is involved in managing your dealings and relationships with the mother(s) of your child/ren? Has that presented any challenges for you? Tell me about it.
  - 6a. Tell me about the last time such a challenge came up. What happened? How did you cope with (i.e., resolve, navigate) that challenge?
7. [If applicable] How about your current partner? How does she feel about your kids . . . your relationship with them?

Interviewer: Redirect attention to the family network tree diagram. OK, now I have a much better understanding of your relationships with all these people that we have marked down. You're keeping a lot of balls in the air. Thinking about how they all fit together, talk to me about what it's been like to handle all these different relationships on a day-to-day basis.

## V. PERSONAL IDENTITY, STRENGTHS, AND CHALLENGES

Okay, I'd like to focus more on you as a person, your strengths and challenges, and your views on fatherhood and what it means to be a man.

1. For starters, you are XX old, right? So, when did you first start thinking of yourself as a man and not a boy? Did something happen to make you feel or act differently? What was the difference?
2. When you think about what it means to be a man, what's really important (e.g., what qualities come to mind)? What kind of man are you striving to be?
3. What do you think makes for a good father (e.g., good provider, discipline, role model/guide, spending quality time, open communication, love, honesty, a good partner/spouse)? These things you just talked about . . . which do you think is the most important?
4. People often have turning points or forks in the road that shape who they become as men. What about for you?
5. Tell me about something you've done in your life that you are really proud of.
6. Ok, now let's talk about some of the challenges you face or have faced in the past. Tell me about some of the biggest challenges or problems you have faced in your past. How about now?

## VI. RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD PROGRAM

1. Now I'm going to ask you more about the [PROGRAM NAME]. Pretend like I don't know anything about this program. Take me back to when you first walked in through those doors . . . what was that like? What did you think?
2. How did you learn about the program?
3. Why did you decide to go to it?
4. What did you think the program was going to be like?
5. What did you hope would happen if you went through this program?
6. So, what was the program like for you?
7. I'm interested in your experiences with the [PROGRAM NAME] staff. Tell me about them. Tell me about a memorable interaction . . . positive or negative . . . that you had with a staff person there.
8. Now let's talk more about the specific services/activities that you received or participated in. Tell me all about those.
9. What services/activities were offered through the program that you could have participated in but didn't? How come?
10. What services or experiences in particular motivated you to stay in the program or stick with the program as long as you did? What kept you coming back?
11. [IF PROGRAM NOT COMPLETED]: Tell me the story of how you stopped going to the program.
12. So, what do you think you got out of the program? Tell me more about that.
  - 12a. What aspects of the program did you value most? What were the most important things you learned or gained from participating?
13. What did you learn from taking part in the [PROGRAM NAME] and try to use in your everyday life? Give me a couple of examples.
14. Some fathers say programs like [PROGRAM NAME] helped them connect or interact with other organizations that might help them. How about for you?
15. Based on your experience with [PROGRAM NAME], how could the program have been better? What was missing, if anything?
16. Sometimes, participation in a fatherhood program can have a big impact on a person's life, and sometimes not. How about for you?

## VII. EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES

We've just touched on the employment services you received as part of the fatherhood program. Now, I'd like to talk more about your financial situation . . . how you are getting along, your experiences with jobs and making money, the financial support you provide your kids, and what you have and want in terms of employment.

1. To start with, how are things going for you in terms of your current employment situation?
2. Tell me about the kinds of jobs you have had. <Intent: Get a general idea of his work history, not a detailed accounting of all the jobs he has had>
3. Have you spent much time trying to find a job? What's that been like for you?
4. Sometimes keeping a job can be really challenging. How about for you?
5. There are jobs where people get paid with a paycheck, and there are other jobs where people get paid in cash. What about for you?
6. [IF JUGGLING MORE THAN ONE "JOB," WHETHER FORMAL OR INFORMAL]: Tell me, how do you manage all this? Let's start with last week. How did you manage these jobs last week? How about more generally?
7. What effect has your job (or lack of a job) had on your involvement with your children and your relationship with the mothers of your children?

## VIII. CHILD SUPPORT

1. Tell me all the ways you financially support your child/ren.

**Interviewer: Encourage respondents to talk about both formal and informal forms of child support. Probe to understand how this may vary across his children.**

2. Tell me (more) about your experiences with the child support system.

2a. Do you have a formal child support order that requires you to pay a certain amount of money?

2b. How much does the court say you have to pay every month?

2c. Lots of men are behind on their support. How about for you?

2d. Have you ever tried to get your child support order changed? Tell me about your experience with that. [If not]: Why not?

2f. What is your overall opinion of the child support agency and system? iX.  
Goals, ASPIRATIONS, and Future Orientation

3. Thinking about your life, are you where you thought you would be at this point?

4. Where do you see yourself six months from now? How about a year from now?  
Five years from now?

5. How do you think any part of the [PROGRAM NAME] will help/has helped you get there?

6. And finally, talk to me about your hopes and dreams for your child(ren).



## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> In 2014, 57 percent of African American children and 32 percent of Hispanic children lived without a biological father in their home compared to 18 percent of White children and 11 percent of Asian children (U.S. Census Bureau 2015).
- <sup>2</sup> The Healthy Marriage (HM) program has also been funded under the same section of the Social Security Act.
- <sup>3</sup> A slightly different enrollment timeline was used for each site: December 2012–September 2013 for Father Support Center; January 2013–October 2013 for the FATHER Project; February 2013–October 2013 for Connections to Success; and February 2013–September 2013 for Urban Ventures.
- <sup>4</sup> We also excluded fathers who only had children age 19 and older, or who did not provide a telephone number where they could be reached (in the baseline survey), or those for whom English was a second language. See Appendix A for more detail.
- <sup>5</sup> For one site, Urban Ventures, there is a third group that includes an alternative definition of high participation, which applies to fathers who attended eight or more of the one-time special workshops offered the last week of September 2013. The remaining fathers from Urban Ventures are assigned to either high or moderate participation strata.
- <sup>6</sup> The median age of fathers in the qualitative study is 34 years old.
- <sup>7</sup> Four percent of fathers with a child support order did not provide information in the baseline survey about how much they paid in child support the last month.
- <sup>8</sup> Fathers completed the baseline survey at the time they enrolled in the RF programs and prior to their interview for the qualitative study. The percentages described in the following section can differ from the survey for two reasons: (1) the surveys and interviews were conducted at different times, and (2) the mode of data collection—a telephone survey versus an in-person interview with an FNT—may have resulted in different responses from fathers.
- <sup>9</sup> A parenting-time agreement defines the time that a child will spend with each of the parents. In the case of parental divorce, it is usually called a child custody and visitation agreement and is a required part of the divorce order. When the parents of a child who were never married decide to separate, one parent may file for child support, but a visitation agreement is typically not a part of that order. The never-married noncustodial parent usually must petition the court for a parenting-time agreement themselves.
- <sup>10</sup> Relationships with the various women with whom they had had children varied, of course, so a father could have a good relationship with one former partner and a poor relationship with another. We also measured the proportion of fathers' relationships with their children's mothers that were described as poor (i.e. instead of the proportion of fathers with at least one relationship described as poor) and the proportion described as excellent or good. We found a similar pattern: men described over half of all relationships as poor, and less than a quarter of all relationships as excellent or very good.
- <sup>11</sup> Personal development covers such topics as stress and coping, responding to discrimination, problem solving and decision making, what it means to be a man, interpersonal skills, self-sufficiency, and goal planning.
- <sup>12</sup> The RF programs began PACT study enrollment at slightly different points in time, and therefore the enrollment timeline used to construct the sample frame also varied slightly by site: December 2012–September 2013 for Father Support Center; January 2013–October 2013 for the FATHER Project; February 2013–October 2013 for Connections to Success; and February 2013–September 2013 for Urban Ventures.
- <sup>13</sup> For one RF program site, Urban Ventures, there is a third stratum that includes any fathers who attended eight or more of the one-time special workshops offered the last week of September 2013. The remaining fathers from Urban Ventures were recruited from either the high or moderate participation strata, as in the other sites.

