

**Framing the Future of Economic Security Evaluation Research  
for the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network**

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## Framing the Future of Economic Security Evaluation Research for the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network

This brief, written for the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network, offers a set of recommendations about how to build knowledge on effective programs and policies to improve the economic condition of disadvantaged fathers. After an introductory section, the brief begins with a short summary of findings from key past evaluations of employment-oriented programs for fathers or, in some cases, other groups of disadvantaged men. The next section describes important ongoing studies that will yield new findings in the coming years. The final sections identify research gaps and highlight some key challenges that will need to be addressed in future studies on this topic.

### Why Focus on Fathers

Over the past three decades, broad economic shifts in the United States have led to stagnant or declining earnings and employment rates for workers without postsecondary education or training. These trends, which were exacerbated by the Great Recession and the ensuing slow recovery, have been particularly severe for men. For example, male workers with less than a high school education earned on average \$17.45 per hour in 1975 (in 2011 dollars), compared with only \$12.71 in 2011, a 27 percent decline.<sup>1</sup>

Less-educated men are more likely to become fathers at a relatively early age. Among men with less than a high school education, 38 percent are fathers by age 22, and 73 percent are fathers by age 30 (among fathers with a bachelor's degree, the corresponding figures are 3 percent and 38 percent).<sup>2</sup> Thus, worsening labor market prospects for less-educated men have direct implications for the wellbeing of children. Many studies have demonstrated that economic resources play a key role in children's development.<sup>3</sup> Parents with greater economic resources can access higher quality child care and medical care, books, toys, and other resources that promote healthy development. Greater resources may also reduce parental stress and improve parenting.<sup>4</sup>

Today, most births to less educated young parents are out-of-wedlock. While these couples are often romantically involved at the time of the birth, they are likely to split up in the next few years, which means that many of the same fathers who are struggling economically become involved with the child support system. In recent years, that system has become increasingly adept at establishing paternity, locating noncustodial parents, and collecting child support, usually via wage withholding, resulting in large increases in collections.

However, highly automated enforcement tools are less effective with noncustodial parents who are not steadily employed in the formal labor market. One study found that 70 percent of child support arrears

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<sup>1</sup> Economic Policy Institute, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Smeeding, Garfinkel, and Mincy, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Carlson and Magnuson, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> McLoyd, 1998.

are owed by noncustodial parents earning less than \$10,000 a year.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the child support system's increasing effectiveness may actually discourage low-income noncustodial parents from working in the formal economy.

Increasingly, child support agencies are broadening their mission beyond enforcement, looking for ways to engage low-income noncustodial parents and provide or broker services to help them improve their economic circumstances and play positive roles as parents.

### What Has Been Learned from Evaluations that Have Been Conducted?

This section discusses the results of several rigorous evaluations of employment programs for fathers or, in some cases, other disadvantaged men. This is not a comprehensive literature review (other such reviews are available) but rather an attempt to highlight some key studies and identify cross-cutting lessons about what is known.

**Employment-oriented programs for fathers.** Although many of the funding streams that support fatherhood programs require some type of evaluation, programs are more likely to collect client monitoring data than program outcome data, and rigorous evaluations that attempt to isolate the impact of fatherhood programs have been few and far between.<sup>6</sup>

The Parent's Fair Share Demonstration, which operated in the early 1990s, developed and tested a model for unemployed noncustodial parents who owe child support; it included four components: peer support groups built around a curriculum called Responsible Fatherhood; mediation services to try to resolve conflicts between parents; enhanced child support enforcement practices (such as expedited modification of child support orders); and employment services. These basic components have been part of many fatherhood programs implemented since that time. There was an attempt to use on-the-job training (OJT) as a key employment service because OJT provides training in the context of paid work; it was assumed that many participants would be in financial need and would not want to sit through lengthy unpaid classroom training programs.<sup>7</sup>

After a pilot, PFS was tested in seven sites using a randomized control trial (RCT) design. The overall findings were mixed.

- PFS modestly increased employment and earnings, but only for the least-employable fathers.
- The program also encouraged some fathers, particularly those who were least involved with their children initially, to take a more active parenting role.

<sup>5</sup> Sorenson, Sousa, and Schaner, 2007

<sup>6</sup> Klempin and Mincy, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> In typical OJT programs, employers who hire certain disadvantaged workers receive a subsidy worth half of the new employee's wages for up to 6 months.

- Men referred to PFS paid more child support than those in the control group, in part because the process of assessing eligibility uncovered a fair amount of previously-unreported employment.

The programs found it difficult to arrange OJT placements for participants, in part because the mainstream employment and training system at the time (the Job Training Partnership Act) was reluctant to work with the very disadvantaged men served by PFS because JTPA-funded programs were driven by performance standards that stressed successful outcomes. Thus, the most typical employment service was job search assistance.<sup>8</sup>

Several other, more recent studies used quasi-experimental designs to evaluate employment-oriented programs for noncustodial parents. The results of these studies are less definitive than those from RCTs, but several have found at least some positive results. For example, studies of two Texas-based programs, Noncustodial Parent (NCP) Choices and Project Bootstrap, found statistically significant gains in employment and child support outcomes.<sup>9</sup> NCP Choices was a mandatory program developed collaboratively by the courts, the child support agency, and workforce boards. Project Bootstrap, an earlier program targeting young fathers, offered incentive payments to encourage participation in program services. Both programs offered a mix of employment services including job search assistance and education and training – plus other services. New York’s Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative included voluntary employment programs for noncustodial parents, often led by workforce agencies. The evaluation found increases in both earnings and child support payments.<sup>10</sup>

An evaluation of the Colorado-based Parents to Work program – which featured co-located workforce and child support staff – also found significant increases in earnings and child support payments.<sup>11</sup>

**Other programs serving dis-advantaged men.** A number of studies have tested employment programs that did not specifically target fathers but served significant numbers of disadvantaged men. Often these studies have found that programs are more effective for women than for men, but there have been some positive results for males.

Perhaps the most promising recent example is the Sectoral Employment Impact Study, conducted by Public Private Ventures.<sup>12</sup> This study used a random assignment design to evaluate three programs that provided industry-specific job training for disadvantaged job seekers. About half of the study participants were male, most were over age 25, and the largest proportion was African American. Overall, the programs produced substantial increases in earnings, particularly in the second year of the two-year study period. Program group members were also more likely to find jobs with benefits. The gains appeared to be somewhat larger for women than for men, but there were significant earnings

<sup>8</sup> Miller and Knox, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Schroeder and Doughty, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Lippold and Sorensen, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Pearson, Davis, and Venohr, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Maguire et al., 2010.

increases for males. It is important to note that these training programs rigorously screened applicants. Two of the three programs required a high school diploma or GED, and all three required a minimum level of reading proficiency. This type of screening would make such programs inaccessible to many disadvantaged fathers.

An older national study of JTPA also found modest positive earnings gains for adult males from programs providing classroom training, job search assistance, OJT, or other services.<sup>13</sup> Some studies of youth-focused programs have also found positive results for young men (who are not necessarily fathers). Examples include the high school-based Career Academies model, which produced long-term gains in earnings for males, and “second chance” programs for dropouts like the National Guard Youth Challenge program, whose participants are about 80 percent male.<sup>14</sup>

More mixed findings emerged from random assignment evaluations of five transitional jobs programs for individuals who were recently incarcerated. Almost all of the participants in these programs were male, and about half were fathers (mostly noncustodial parents). The programs offered fully subsidized jobs for 2-4 months, usually in nonprofit organizations. The transitional jobs were designed to help participants learn “soft skills” such as how to show up for work on time, how to work with others, how to interact with supervisors, and so forth. The transitional jobs were also intended to provide participants with a work reference and recent employment to include on their résumés. Participants then received help searching for unsubsidized jobs.

All five of the transitional jobs programs produced similar results in the employment domain. In the initial months of the follow-up period, men assigned to the program group (who were offered transitional jobs) were much more likely to be employed than those in the control group. However, these gains were driven entirely by the subsidized jobs themselves, and the differences between the program and control groups evaporated after the subsidized jobs ended. There were no lasting impacts on employment or earnings, though one site – the New York City-based Center for Employment Opportunities – produced significant reductions in recidivism that lasted at least three years.<sup>15</sup>

**Cross-cutting lessons and “Best Practices.”** It is difficult to draw firm conclusions about program effectiveness from such a thin evidence base. Several programs appear to have been at least moderately effective at increasing employment or earnings for noncustodial parents or other disadvantaged men, but each of these programs offered a somewhat different mix of services and the programs targeted different groups.

One 2008 review identified cross-cutting findings and operational lessons from a number of responsible fatherhood initiatives.<sup>16</sup> Two of the key findings are that fatherhood programs have consistently struggled to recruit and retain fathers, and that programs have had difficulty mounting effective

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<sup>13</sup> Bloom et al., 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Kemple, 2008; Millenky et al., 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Bloom, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Martinson and Nightingale, 2008.

employment services. The authors recommend that programs should use both “carrots and sticks” (i.e., incentives and potential penalties) to encourage participation in program activities, and that employment services should offer opportunities for participants to build occupational skills while earning income or stipends.

The review also concluded that flexible child support services are critical because many participants hold very negative views of the child support system and face support orders that are set at levels above what they can reasonably be expected to pay. This issue is directly related to the success of employment programs because when support orders are viewed as excessive, noncustodial parents may be unwilling to participate in child support-linked programs or to work in the formal economy. A random assignment study in Wisconsin found that noncustodial parents were less likely to work “off the books” and more likely to pay support when payments were passed through to custodial parents on welfare rather than being retained by the state to recover costs.<sup>17</sup> Other flexible policies focus on the child support order itself: allowing a “self-support reserve” to set aside income for the NCP’s living expenses, expediting review and adjustment of support orders when appropriate, and avoiding imputing orders when parents are unemployed.

Finally, the review notes that programs must address co-parenting issues because the complex and sometimes conflictual relationships between fathers and mothers can affect fathers’ willingness to participate in programs. There is a long history of initiatives to address child access and visitation issues within the context of the child support program, and there is some quasi-experimental evidence that this approach may increase child support payments.<sup>18</sup>

### What Studies are Going On?

Although the evidence base on employment-oriented programs for fathers is thin, several important and rigorous studies are underway. The studies described below include random assignment evaluations of at least 16 employment-oriented programs for noncustodial parents.

The Parents and Children Together (PACT) Evaluation includes random assignment evaluations of four Responsible Fatherhood programs, in Missouri and Minnesota. All of the programs provide a mix of employment services, along with parenting classes, counseling and other supports. The project is scheduled to end in 2016.

The U.S. Department of Labor’s Enhanced Transitional Jobs Demonstration (ETJD) provided about \$6 million each to seven programs targeting either ex-offenders or low-income noncustodial parents. The four programs targeting NCPs are in Atlanta, Milwaukee, San Francisco, and Syracuse (the programs targeting ex-offenders also serve many fathers). Each of the programs offers some form of subsidized job to participants, along with a range of other services and supports. At the same time, HHS’s

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<sup>17</sup> Meyer and Cancian, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> McHale, Waller, and Pearson, 2012.

Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration (STED) is also testing subsidized employment programs for various disadvantaged groups. All of the programs in both projects are being tested using a random assignment design. Sample sizes are 1,000 or larger in almost all sites, which will allow the studies to present results for each site separately. HHS and DOL are collaborating closely on the two projects (for example, data collection instruments are mostly the same in both studies). In fact, the STED project is covering the evaluation costs for two of the four ETJD sites that target NCPs. All of the sites targeting NCPs completed enrollment in late 2013.

The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) is sponsoring the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) to rigorously test child support-led employment programs for unemployed noncustodial parents. Eight states received about \$2.3 million each (including both grants and matching funds) over 5 years to enroll 1,500 parents.<sup>19</sup> The programs are offering employment services, parenting classes, domestic violence services, and enhanced child support enforcement (e.g., expedited review and, if appropriate, modification of child support orders). Enrollment into the study began in late 2013 and will continue until 2016.

In addition to these studies, other ongoing projects are testing employment models for disadvantaged groups that may include many fathers. For example, DOL is conducting the Reintegration of Ex-Offenders (RExO) evaluation, a random assignment study of 24 employment programs for former prisoners. The sample of nearly 5,000 is about 80 percent male, and surely includes a large number of fathers (about half of state prisoners nationwide are fathers).

Finally, an important study in New York City, Paycheck Plus, is testing a new earnings supplement targeted to low-income single adults without dependent children. The project responds to the fact that the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), perhaps the nation's most effective anti-poverty program, provides fairly generous benefits for low-income families with dependent children (up to \$6,000 per year), but very limited benefits to low-wage workers without dependent children, including noncustodial parents. Many of the men who have been most dramatically affected by the alarming employment and earnings trends discussed earlier are not custodial parents, and thus do not benefit much from the EITC – even if they pay child support regularly.

The Paycheck Plus supplement is worth up to \$2,000 per year for three years, with the largest benefit available to workers earning between \$7,000 and \$18,000. Nearly 60 percent of the 6,000 study participants are male, though only a minority of them have children under age 19 (i.e., these are noncustodial parents). Paycheck Plus is a critical project because even the most successful employment and training programs are likely to leave many participants working in low-wage jobs. Income supplementation through the tax system (along with the minimum wage) may be the most effective way to improve the economic status of less educated workers in the shorter term. Politicians and policy experts across the political spectrum have discussed various plans to increase the EITC for “childless” workers, including noncustodial parents.

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<sup>19</sup> The grants were awarded to California, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin.

### What are the Key Research Gaps?

The completed studies discussed in Section II provide some hints about strategies that may be effective at increasing employment and earnings for fathers, but there are few definitive answers. Hopefully, the ongoing studies described in Section III will greatly expand this knowledge base in the coming years. In the meantime, however, there are several areas where additional research could shed light on important unanswered questions.

**Delivering employment services.** In order to improve participants' employment outcomes, an employment program usually must do one or more of the following: increase participants' skills or motivation, connect participants with jobs they might not otherwise have been able to access, or change employers' hiring decisions in a way that favors program participants over other candidates. Different types of employment services are designed to achieve each of these objectives.

Most of the past and current evaluations described above studied programs that provided a mix of employment-related services: job readiness classes, job search assistance, job development or job placement services, adult education and GED preparation, subsidized or transitional employment opportunities, and/or occupational training. These services are quite different from one another. Some are relatively easy to implement, while others are very difficult to do well. Some are fairly inexpensive, and others are quite costly. The studies typically do not describe in much detail how the programs delivered these services or how they matched participants with particular activities.

As fatherhood programming becomes more widespread, it will be crucial to understand which types of employment services are most effective for which types of fathers. Findings on "what works best for whom" emerged from many random assignment studies of welfare-to-work programs in the 1990s and 2000s, but those lessons may not be applicable to fatherhood programs. Besides the differences in target populations (and genders), it can be quite different to operate employment programs for individuals who are receiving cash assistance than for those who are not. Thus, new studies might examine, in some detail, how participants flow through fatherhood programs, how they are assessed and matched with particular employment services, and how they fare in those services. It might be possible to construct RCTs that test different employment strategies side-by-side to learn which kinds of participants benefit most from particular activities. For example, in the 1990s, as part of the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work strategies, welfare recipients in certain sites were assigned, at random, to a program approach stressing quick job entry, an approach stressing education or training, or a control group.

**Combining employment services with other components.** As discussed earlier, most fatherhood programs include several components. For example, programs may provide employment services, parenting classes, relationship skills classes, mediation services, access and visitation services, child support advocacy, financial literacy instruction, and other supports. Not all fathers will need or want all of these services, so it is important to learn more about who can benefit from which components and how to decide who needs what. Such findings could have critical implications for program design and management because few organizations have the expertise or resources to provide the full range of



disparate services. This means that fatherhood programs often involve complex linkages among multiple agencies that can be challenging to develop and maintain.

Similarly, program designers need to know how to sequence these services. For example: Does it make more sense to engage fathers with peer support groups or parenting classes, or to move directly to employment programming? If fathers find work, will they participate in other services?

Finally, it is important to learn whether additional services should be added to the mix. For example, many programs in the criminal justice system stress cognitive behavioral therapy or other approaches designed to change destructive thinking patterns. Should such approaches be integrated into fatherhood programs? As discussed earlier, RCTs could be constructed to test different approaches side by side.

**Subgroups.** Little is known about special considerations in serving particular subsets of fathers, such as those who have children in multiple families, and those who have criminal records. Multiple partner fertility is very common, which means that many fatherhood program participants will be balancing more than one family. They may live with one or more children and owe child support for other children with whom they do not reside, or they may live with no children but owe child support for children living with more than one mother. Studies could examine how these competing demands affect participation or success in employment programming.

Most fatherhood programs that serve disadvantaged noncustodial parents find that a majority of their participants have had some contact with the criminal justice system. Conversely, reentry programs targeting former prisoners find that half or more of their participants are fathers. It is important to note that these two situations are not identical. Reentry programs typically target people just released from prison, a group that faces unique challenges in reintegrating into the community. Fatherhood programs are more likely to encounter people who had some prior involvement with the justice system, but who were not recently in prison. While a felony conviction can cause lasting difficulties in the labor market, individuals whose justice involvement was relatively long ago probably do not face immediate reintegration challenges. New studies could examine how fatherhood programs address the special needs of participants with criminal records or, conversely, how reentry programs address the special needs of fathers.

**Engagement and retention.** A cross-cutting issue that runs through all of these topics is engagement. Many of the programs for disadvantaged fathers discussed above – even those that received referrals from courts – struggled to recruit and retain participants. Similarly, programs typically find that many participants who find jobs have difficulty retaining them. Matching participants with appropriate employment services, combining and sequencing program components in the most effective way, providing flexible child support services, and tailoring services to meet the needs of special populations such as those with criminal records are all potential strategies for improving engagement and retention in fatherhood programs.

In fact, given that several large-scale RCTs of complex programs are underway, the most pressing need in the short term may be for narrower studies that examine whether particular programmatic practices can improve engagement and retention in programs – or in jobs. For example, a study might compare engagement rates for participants who are exposed to two different sequences of program services, test the efficacy of incentives designed to encourage program participation or employment retention, or study the impact on participation of “nudges” informed by the principles of behavioral economics, a field that marries insights from economics and psychology.

Finally, it might be possible to study whether the institutional structure of programs affects both engagement and program effectiveness. For example, some argue that “grass-roots” community-based fatherhood programs are better able to attract and engage disadvantaged fathers than programs run by large, established multi-service organizations that may have an advantage in competing for funding. On the other hand, larger organizations may have an advantage in areas such as job development that require specialized expertise and connections in the business community. This raises the question of whether there are effective strategies that combine these two types of expertise.

### What are the Key Research Challenges?

While the kinds of studies described in the previous section could provide vital information, they will confront several key challenges.

First, the focus on specific program components, features, or practices makes sense, particularly given the scarcity of resources for programming for fathers and the need to make hard choices on how to allocate program funding. Moreover, the current large-scale RCTs described in Section III are not designed to assess the impact of particular components. That said, a focus on disentangling the effects of components might imply that there is strong evidence that certain multi-component programs are effective for this population. In fact, while there is a hope that ongoing studies will yield more definitive answers, it is important to reiterate the current knowledge base is quite thin. In other words, while it would be ideal to start with strong evidence about program effectiveness and try to drill down to understand why some programs work better than others for particular groups of fathers, that is not the state of the evidence in the fatherhood field.

Second, the most rigorous way to study the impact of particular components or practices is to randomly assign program participants to different treatments. However, studies in which all research groups receive a program treatment typically find relatively small differences in longer-term outcomes between groups and, thus, require large samples to yield statistically significant findings. This is one reason why the previous section emphasized the key role of engagement and program participation – rather than focusing solely on longer-term outcomes such as employment and child support payments.

Third, many evaluations of employment programs rely on unemployment insurance (UI) quarterly earnings records to measure work outcomes. UI earnings data are relatively inexpensive to collect and analyze, and they cover the vast majority of formal employment. However, there are challenges

associated with these data. Owing to privacy concerns, budget cuts, and other factors, it has become increasingly difficult to obtain UI earnings data from some states. It is sometimes possible to obtain these data from the federally-administered National Directory of New Hires, but those data can only be used for research under certain conditions (for example, the study must further the purposes of the TANF program).

Moreover, while UI records have broad coverage, they do not measure many jobs in the informal economy, and low-income fathers may be particularly likely to work in such jobs.<sup>20</sup> It is sometimes possible to obtain information on such jobs through surveys of study participants, but it is extremely expensive to obtain high response rates on such surveys. Fortunately, UI records and surveys usually tell the same general story, but there are exceptions. For example, a 2013 evaluation of a conditional cash transfer program in New York City found an increase in employment as measured by a survey, but no increase in UI records. The researchers speculated that the program may have increased employment, but only in jobs not covered by UI records.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the Parents Fair Share project examined earning impacts for the subset of study participants who had no high school diploma, and who responded to the follow-up survey. The survey showed that the program increased earnings by more than \$2,500 in the first year of the study period, while the UI records showed an impact of \$743 that was not statistically significant.<sup>22</sup>

Programs may be able to capture some self-report data by interviewing former participants who are willing to stay in touch. Asking questions about job characteristics, job stability, and material hardship may provide useful evidence on the economic status of former participants.

### What are the Key Conclusions?

Previous evaluations of employment programs for disadvantaged fathers and other low-income men have found some models that improved participants' employment outcomes, at least modestly. However, the knowledge base is too thin to draw firm conclusions or to suggest what works best for whom.

Fortunately, a number of rigorous studies of fatherhood programs are ongoing, and should greatly expand the evidence base in the next few years.

In the meantime, narrower studies could address important questions about program design and program implementation, with a special focus on participant engagement, which has challenged most past programs.

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<sup>20</sup> Similar issues exist in measuring child support payment outcomes. Administrative data are relatively easy to obtain and analyze, and costs do not vary much for larger samples. However, these data do not capture informal support that is not paid through the child support system.

<sup>21</sup> Riccio et al., 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Martinez and Miller, 2000

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