

Sustaining and Growing Father Involvement for Low-Income Children

Policy Brief No. 13

This brief highlights father-involvement programs that seek to sustain and grow low-income, nonresidential fathers' emotional and financial involvement in their children's lives. It calls on policy makers to address disadvantaged fathers' urgent needs, especially for employment-related services and a child support system that offers more than sanctions.

Introduction

Fathers have a unique and crucial role in child development. The advantages of nurturing father/child bonds include school success, healthy self-esteem, mental health and avoidance of drug use, to name a few (Horn et al. 2002; Mincy et al. 2005). In addition, child support paid by noncustodial fathers raises 500,000 children above the poverty line (Sorensen et al. 2000).

Societal and cultural trends have contributed to changes in the family structure that mean *nearly half of poor children do not live with their fathers* (Sorensen 2003). Further:

- About 25% of children (of all incomes) see their nonresidential fathers each week.
- One in three children (of all incomes) has had no contact with their nonresidential father in the prior year.

Policy Recommendations

To sustain and grow father-involvement among low-income men, governments should:

- **Assure father-involvement programs focus on fathers' urgent needs, which often relate to employment and legal services.**
- **Integrate low-income fathers into family services.**
- **Transform child support into family-centered systems in which the foremost goal is to benefit children.**
- **Stabilize father-involvement supports through partnerships between state government agencies and community-based programs.**

The full policy recommendation section begins on page 11.

- As children grow up, their nonresidential fathers tend to become less involved, even if they were very engaged in their children's first years. (Horn et al. 2002)

Low-income, nonresidential fathers face extra barriers in nurturing their children. Living outside the child's home by itself creates challenges in maintaining regular, direct contact with children. More importantly, although most fathers remain interested in raising their children, disengagement is often propelled by shame about not being gainfully employed, doubt about fathering skills and difficulty making child support payments (NCSL2000; Mincy et al. 2005). In fact, only 36% of poor children with a nonresidential father received child support in 2001 (Sorensen 2003).

This brief is on *father-involvement programs that seek to sustain and grow low-income, nonresidential fathers' emotional and financial involvement in their children's lives*. Such programs can strengthen families by enabling:

- Low-income children to receive emotional support from both parents.
- Poor children to have improved economic circumstances if increased child support raises family income.
- Noncustodial fathers to overcome child support problems and insufficient employment, both of which are primary barriers to father involvement.
- Human service agencies to attend to the whole family, including nonresidential fathers.

Father-involvement programs are a promising practice that merit policy attention due to the:

- Substantial benefits when nonresidential fathers are involved in their children's lives.

- Significant gaps in public assistance that result in many low-income fathers not getting the help they need to become responsible fathers.

Because the fatherhood-involvement field is still developing, leaders in the field are working to understand how to best protect families from violence, which can be a factor in why fathers are removed from children's lives. Accordingly, this brief speaks to helping low-income, nonresidential fathers who have a history of nurturing relationships with their family and partners. It is a companion to prior Family Strengthening Policy Center (FSPC) briefs on families with incarcerated parents and on marriage and relationship education.

The Facts: Dads Make a Difference

The ways that fathers can be involved with their children are nearly endless: being present at birth, spending time, sharing meals, helping with homework, providing routine caregiving, teaching, playing, setting an example, volunteering at school, etc.

Fathers have a unique impact on their children, in part because they tend to interact differently with children than mothers do. For example, fathers tend to engage children in physically active play while mothers tend to do more routine caregiving.

Sources: Halle 1999; Horn et al. 2002; Sylvester et al. 2002; Mincy et al. 2005

Father Involvement and Caring Improves Child Wellbeing

Nurturing fathers powerfully enhance child wellbeing. Even if they cannot be physically present in their children's day-to-day lives, fathers can have positive bonds with their children. In fact, differences in father involvement explain most of the wellbeing disparity

between children with residential fathers and those who live apart from father. Specifically, as father-involvement rises, measures of child wellbeing improve, although children with residential, involved fathers fare the best (Carlson 2005).

- Compared to others, children whose fathers are involved in their lives:
- Perform better in school (especially sons).
- Complete more years of school.
- Have fewer behavioral problems (from “acting out” to delinquency).
- Have better cognitive and psychosocial development.
- Are less likely to drink, use drugs and initiate sex.
- Have the skills to take initiative and control themselves.
- Experience less poverty.

When these father-involved children grow up, as adults they tend to have:

- Fewer problems getting and keeping a job.
- Better income and/or wealth.

Sources: Halle 1999; Horn et al. 2002; NFI 2004b¹

Child Support Helps Low-Income Families with Children

Just as emotional involvement in a child's life is important, financial support from fathers also can make a real difference.

- Child support raises a half million children above the poverty line (Sorensen et al. 2000).
- For poor families not receiving welfare benefits, child support makes up one third of family income (Sorensen et al. 2000).
- More than 60% of poor children who have a nonresidential father do not receive child support (Sorensen 2003).
- Payment of child support appears to be related to improved school performance, additional years of school completed and fewer behavioral problems (Horn et al. 2002; Mincy et al. 2005).

Further, fathers making regular child support payments are more active in their children's lives (Turetsky 2005).

Facilitators and Barriers for Father-Involvement in Raising Children

In recent decades, the American culture has shifted from defining fathers primarily as breadwinners and discipliners to recognizing them also as caregivers and nurturers. These cultural shifts may contribute to—and/or reflect—the rise in single-father families and stay-at-home fathers (Horn et al. 2002; Sylvester et al. 2002; Coles 2005).

Yet for too many low-income children, nonresidential fathers play a limited role in their lives. The following table explores factors associated with the extent to which low-income, nonresidential fathers are involved with children.

¹ The findings are reported from studies conducted on a wide variety of family structures, but some did not control for family variables (such as income) that could contribute to differences in child wellbeing

Facilitators and Barriers for Low-income, Nonresident Fathers' Involvement with their Children

Facilitators	Barriers
Prior to a child's birth, almost 100% of low-income, unwed fathers desire to help raise their children, and over 9 in 10 mothers would like the fathers to be involved.	Families of origin may not provide sufficient support to help fathers raise their children.
About 80% of unwed, low-income fathers provided financial or other support during pregnancy.	Financial hardship, often related to unstable employment, means many are unable to consistently provide ongoing financial support.
Nonresident fathers who still have some physical proximity to children tend to be more involved than fathers who live far away.	Many fathers (and some custodial mothers) view providing financial or in-kind support as a prerequisite to becoming more involved with their children.
Nearly all fathers care for their children.	Fear of being reported to child support agencies deters involvement with children and tapping into employment or other social services to address barriers to father involvement.
Employment and more education increase the odds a father will stay involved with his children.	The negative stereotyping of "deadbeat dads" increases public resistance to giving low-income, nonresidential fathers needed support.
Fathers whose own father was involved in raising them can draw on real-life examples.	Limited confidence in parenting skills is more common when the father's father was absent.
Nearly all fathers report a deep interest in learning to become a better father.	Many fathers are unconnected to or unaware of supports that could help them get stable, living-wage jobs and/or develop parenting skills.
Children ages 0-5 years are most likely to have involved fathers.	School-age children see their nonresidential fathers less than young children.
In-hospital paternity establishments are associated with father involvement.	Many state child support policy and programs are more oriented to enforcement than giving low-income fathers get the help they need to fulfill their financial responsibilities.
A positive relationship with the child's mother increases the odds for father involvement.	A strained relationship with the child's mother and a lack of essential relationship skills to co-parent can impede father involvement.
Having children motivates fathers to avoid crime.	Incarceration reduces opportunities for providing children with emotional and financial support.

Sources: Reichert 1999; NCSL 2000; Miller et al. 2001; Horn et al. 2002; Sylvester et al. 2002; CRCW 2005; Mincy et al. 2005

Among the barriers, three merit further discussion.

Father Involvement Tends to Drop as Children Age
Birth is often a “magic moment” when fathers have high hopes and desires for helping to raise their children. However, as children age, father involvement tends to weaken among nonresidential fathers, as illustrated in Figure 1 (next page).

Many Child Support Systems Hinder Committed Fathering by DeadBroke Dads

Most low-income fathers are not indifferent to their children and child support obligations. Rather, most are deadbroke and owe more than they can pay. Of the 7 million nonresidential fathers who do not pay child support, 2.5 million are poor. Among poor nonresidential fathers who do not pay child support:

- 43% lack a high school diploma or equivalent.
- Only 43% have jobs (which tend to be low-wage and part-time or seasonal).
- 39% cited a health barrier to employment.
- About 33% did not have recent work experience (Sorensen et al. 2001).

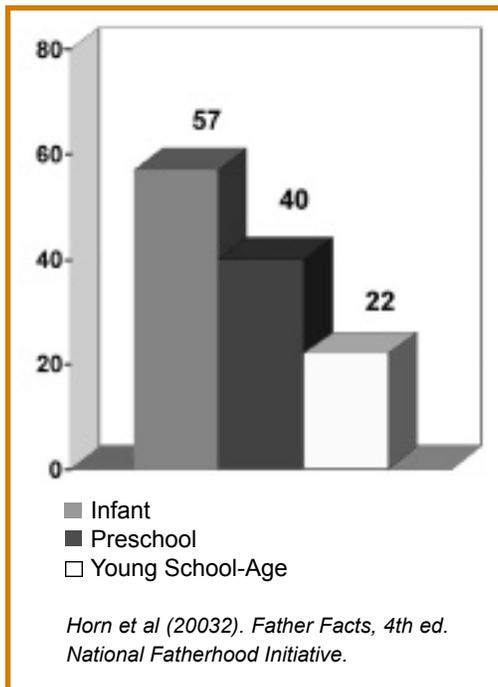
Besides limited education and skills, job opportunities for low-skill workers are scarce. Studies indicate many poor, nonresidential fathers have trouble holding jobs once they find employment (NCSL 2000).

Most child support systems emphasize enforcement over helping disadvantaged noncustodial parents meet their obligations. *For low-income, noncustodial fathers, the child support system can seem alienating or counterproductive, even punitive.* In many states:

- If the child receives welfare benefits, then most child support payments go to the state instead of the child.
- The legal process of setting and changing child support orders is poorly understood.
- Orders often exceed fathers’ ability to pay. (About half of low-income noncustodial parents earn less than the poverty-level for one person.)
- Non-payment results in debt owed to the state.
- Debt quickly accrues.
- Noncompliance may result in jail and loss or suspension of driver’s, professional and occupational licenses—sanctions that further reduce employability.

Child support debt and prior incarceration can also limit access to some jobs otherwise open to low-skill

FIGURE 1: % of Unmarried Fathers Making Weekly Visits with Children, by Age of Child



workers. With rapidly rising debt and a seemingly obscure system that does not recognize inability to pay, many fathers lose hope in their ability to ever pay off their debt or meet their child support orders. As a result, they may be less motivated to:

- Get job training or employment-related assistance.
- Be involved in their children's lives.

Sources: Reichert 1999; Miller et al. 2001; Sylvester et al. 2002; Legler 2003; May et al. 2005; Ash n.d.

Public Assistance Systems Make Nonresidential Fathers a Low Priority

Although deadbroke dads' employment barriers are similar to mothers receiving welfare benefits:

- There are fewer employment-related services for poor, noncustodial fathers than for custodial mothers.
- Many poor, nonresidential fathers are ineligible for public assistance.
- Of supports that are available, deadbroke dads are often not connected to or aware of them.

Lacking enough income to meet child support orders and seeing few opportunities to rectify the situation, noncustodial fathers may evade child support or turn to the underground economy to make money. Some provide informal or in-kind assistance directly to the child or mother (such as buying formula, clothing or school supplies).

Sources: Miller et al. 2001; Sorensen et al. 2001; Horn et al. 2002; Sylvester et al. 2002; Mincy et al. 2005

What Are Father-Involvement Programs?

The premise of many father-involvement programs is that by increasing nonresidential fathers' involvement, children will benefit in the short-term and have a good foundation for adulthood. In turn, involvement should motivate fathers to sustain emotional and financial ties with their children (Mincy et al. 2005).

Key strategies to help low-income, nonresidential men overcome barriers to committed fathering include:

- Job training, placement and retention services.
- Referrals to health care, disability, mental health and substance abuse services.
- Legal services (especially in employment, immigration, child visitation, child support and criminal justice issues).
- Peer support.
- Training or education in parenting, co-parenting and general life-skills.
- Housing and transportation assistance.
- Services for formerly incarcerated fathers.²

Sources: Sylvester et al. 2002; Pearson et al. 2003; Mincy et al. 2005

Research indicates job training and placement services should be a core element in father-involvement programs. Often low-income fathers have an urgent need for this type of support and are unlikely to stay in programs focused solely on parenting (NCSL 2000; May 2004).

Seven state-based father-involvement initiatives have been described as comprehensive.

² See FSPC's policy brief on supporting families with incarcerated parents.

Specifically, they seek to:

- Connect noncustodial dads to readily available supports, including employment.
- Stabilize families by reducing social and economic difficulties in father-absent homes.
- Create strong support systems for noncustodial fathers.
- Increase voluntary paternity establishment.
- Raise child support payments.
- Educate the public about fatherhood's financial and emotional responsibilities.
- Mobilize communities on father-involvement issues.
- Prepare men for fatherhood responsibilities.
- Integrate fathers into family services.

Source: NPNFF 2001

Some father-involvement programs also include efforts to promote or encourage marriage; however, father-involvement programs should not be promoting or encouraging marriage if domestic violence is an issue. By working with the domestic violence community, father-involvement programs should be structured so family safety is the top priority.

Case Studies

Each of these father-involvement case studies demonstrates opportunities to help low-income fathers through a combination of three essential supports: employment (and related) services, father involvement/parenting and child support.

Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development (CFWD)

www.cfwd.org

So disadvantaged men can develop in their roles as nurturing fathers and breadwinners, CFWD offers a broad set of fatherhood development supports:

- Case management.
- Employment and education services.
- Classes in life-skills and parenting.
- Family recreational events.
- Child support management.
- Services for ex-offenders.

One CFWD supports is STRIVE Baltimore (Support and Training in Valuable Employees) that provides intensive training in job readiness. STRIVE graduates receive job placement, retention and advancement assistance. The center's 50/50 parenting program offers peer support and help in developing co-parenting skills.

CFWD is unique in that many services are available to both parents, whether living together or apart. FAMILIES COUNT—Maryland has honored CFWD as an extraordinary organization that improves the odds for Maryland's most vulnerable children. Other sources: CFWD 2001; Mincy et al. 2005

Encompass

North Bend, WA

www.encompassnw.org

Encompass works to nurture, educate, strengthen and support children and their families so that all have the skills and opportunities to reach their full potential. Through Encompass, parents can participate in parent education classes and receive help with accessing

social services. Encompass staff coordinate services provided by other community agencies, school staff, counselors/therapists and child protective services. Children2Fathers is an Encompass-sponsored group of fathers working towards being a positive influence on their children and families and participating in fun planned activities with their kids. The Encompass program is certified by Family Support America.

Fatherhood Initiative of Connecticut

www.fatherhoodinitiative.state.ct.us/index2.htm

Three research demonstration programs, supported by the Fatherhood Initiative of Connecticut, emphasized helping noncustodial fathers become positively involved with their children and improving their compliance with child support orders.

- One program focused on helping fathers with legal issues (such as custody, visitation, child support and divorce) and offering a weekly support group. They primarily served working-class fathers whose relationships with their children's mothers were strained.
- Another emphasized employment services for fathers who were un- or underemployed, had limited education and were currently involved in the criminal justice system (such as being on parole or probation).
- The third offered prison-based services to help young fathers prepare for the transition to civilian life, which were then followed by community-based services after their release.

The programs achieved mixed results. About 54% of enrolled fathers participated less than six months. Among those receiving six or more months of services, evaluators noted some improvements in full-time employment, employment income, paternity establishment, weekly contact with children and parenting attitudes. Two potential reasons cited for

the mixed results are: participants' enduring mistrust of the system and agency cultures that treated *deadbroke* dads like *deadbeat* ones.

Working with the National Practitioner's Network for Fathers and Families, Connecticut has initiated a program to certify community-based fatherhood programs that meet specified standards.

Fathers at Work Initiative (FWI)

www.mott.org

Working with *deadbroke* dads aged 30 years or younger, six FWI demonstration sites sought to help them get jobs, boost earnings and become more involved with their children. Two sites specifically focused on ex-offenders. Services included:

- Job readiness and skills training.
- Paid transitional employment.
- Job placement and retention services.
- Fatherhood skills training.
- Planned father-child activities.
- Peer support groups.

Each site established a formal agreement with child support enforcement agencies, and some also partnered with social welfare and the criminal justice systems. Preliminary evaluation data indicate FWI participants, on average:

- Paid more child support.
- Worked more months.³
- Earned more income (mean annual earnings rose 12% to \$13,111).³
- Were less likely to be unemployed for a year.³

³ * Among FWI participants without a recent history of incarceration.

A key lesson-learned is that changes in public policies and partnerships with public agencies providing family services are necessary because the FWI clients had persistent and serious employment barriers. The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation supported the initiative.

Other sources: Elliott 2005; Mincy et al. 2005

Georgia Fatherhood Initiative

www.div.dhr.state.ga.us/dfcs_cse/father.htm

Success has marked the fatherhood initiative in Georgia. Primarily serving noncustodial fathers who cannot pay child support, the initiative offers a comprehensive network of services. Job training and placement services are a core component provided by technical schools and community-based agencies. Outcomes include significant increases in:

- Hourly wages among job-training graduates.
- Enrolled fathers who paid child support.
- Job retention once employed.

Program participants can also attend classes on life-skills and parenting. Cited benefits to government and taxpayers include reduced costs in child support enforcement, incarceration and Medicaid.

Other sources: NCSL 2000; Mincy et al. 2005

Are They Effective?

Practice and research clearly show low-income, nonresidential fathers are not receiving sufficient assistance to sustain and grow their emotional and financial commitment to their children. Attempting to reverse this situation, father-involvement programs

are best characterized as a promising practice. Many demonstration projects have yielded modest but positive outcomes in terms of father involvement and child support (Reichert 1999; Miller et al. 2001; Elliott 2005; Mincy et al. 2005). For example, with federal funding and waivers, responsible-fatherhood demonstration programs in eight states increased:

- Incomes by 25-250% and employment rates by 8-33%, especially for men who had been unemployed. However, most jobs paid low wages that fell short of enabling the fathers to support themselves and provide for their children.
- Child support compliance by 4-31%, primarily for those who had not been making payments.
- Time spent with children for 27% of the enrolled fathers. (Pearson et al. 2003)

Fatherhood initiatives vary widely and serve a diverse population of low-income, nonresidential fathers. Many do not have sufficient funding to have a reasonable chance at making a difference. Consequently, practitioners and researchers are still figuring out:

- How much father-involvement programs can improve the lives of children, fathers and families.
- What combination and intensity of supports are needed to have an impact.
- What professional standards of practice should be.

Source: Miller et al. 2001; Sylvester et al. 2002

Reasons Why Father-Involvement Programs Could Succeed

Funding and service infrastructure are an essential foundation for successful programs.

- Many low-income communities already have the services with which father-involvement initiatives need to be connected.

- Federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funding can be used to help low-income fathers. Other sources include states' Maintenance-of-Effort funds for assisting families transitioning from welfare; Social Services Block Grant (Title XX) for the delivery of employment-related and parenting services; and Child Support Enforcement Program funds for conducting outreach and providing client services.

Sources: NCSL 2000; Sylvester et al. 2002; Mincy et al. 2005

Reasons Why Father-Involvement Programs Could Fall Short of their Promise

Attention is needed to obstacles that may prevent father-involvement initiatives from achieving their potential.

- Many state-level initiatives are underfunded.
- Recruitment and retention is difficult. Potential participants fear they will be taken to court for child support instead of receiving assistance. Even fathers who enroll tend to be highly mobile.
- Some low-income men find work on their own, but many have serious barriers to becoming gainfully employed that require time and significant effort to overcome.
- Lack of coordination among state agencies impedes effectiveness and prospects for long-term sustainability.
- Few initiatives assemble comprehensive services for low-income, nonresidential fathers (only seven states come close).
- Society puts more time and resources into helping low-income mothers, even though fathers face similar problems in becoming more self-sufficient and fulfilling their parental responsibilities.

- Many social and employment services have limited experience working with men, especially young fathers (reflecting limited funding to serve this population).

Sources: Miller et al. 2001; NPNFF 2001; Sylvester et al. 2002; Pearson et al. 2003; Mincy et al. 2005

Current Best Practices

To improve the odds for success, practitioners, noncustodial father-clients and researchers recommend the following practices to recruit fathers and help them succeed in fathering.

- *Focus services on fathers' urgent needs* by developing effective partnerships between father-involvement programs and a diverse array of social services and family supports, especially:
 - Job training, placement and retention services.
 - Reliable legal services.
 - Screening and assistance with disabilities, health issues and substance abuse.
 - Transportation.
- *Offer paid job training or expand on-the-job training opportunities* so participants can make child support payments and cover living expenses. If job opportunities are few, community-service jobs or stipends may be needed.
- *Get results* in order to retain clients and attract new participants.
- *Move clients making progress towards employment and gaining access to their children* into other fathering supports such as parenting classes, peer support groups, mentors, mediation services, etc.

- *Leverage the magic moment of the child's birth* when fathers may be most receptive to assistance in assuming their new role. Better outcomes may result when they receive supports prior to accumulating child support debt or experiencing strains in the relationship with the mother.
- *Collaborate with domestic violence agencies.*
- *Link community-based programs and outreach to state agencies providing family services.* Community-based organizations can more easily gain the trust of deadbroke fathers. Yet these local organizations need partnerships with state agencies (especially child support agencies) in order to effectively help.

Sources: Harris 2000; NCSL 2000; Boggess 2003; Pearson et al. 2003; Hershey et al. 2004; May 2004; Hoffman 2005; Macomber et al. 2005; Mincy et al. 2005

Policy Recommendations

In summary, a substantial number of low-income children live without a father present, and visits by nonresidential fathers drop as children grow up. Father involvement improves child wellbeing and outcomes and can offset disadvantages associated with his physical absence in the child's home. But low-income, nonresidential fathers face serious barriers to staying involved with their children.

“ Poor fathers who want to take care of their children, but see their money going to reimburse the state do not feel effective or useful to their children, and they are less likely to stay involved in their children's lives. ”

– Boggess 2003

To sustain and grow father-involvement, policy makers must attend to disadvantaged fathers' urgent needs, especially for employment-related services and a child support system that offers more than sanctions. Once fathers are progressing in their ability to pay child support, programs to encourage emotional involvement and build parenting skills are more likely to sustain participation.

Federal Government

The president and Congress should:

- Establish a new funding source—or augment existing family services funding—or employment-related services for low-income, noncustodial parents (Sorensen 2002).
- Give states incentives to adopt changes to child support systems appropriate for deadbroke fathers.
- Support studies to evaluate program impact and disseminate study results.
- Avoid cutting Child Support Enforcement Program funding.

State and Local Governments

State and local policy makers have several key opportunities to strengthen low-income families by fostering father involvement.

Restructure father-involvement programs to meet fathers' urgent needs (especially sufficient employment) and increase their ability to be financially and emotionally involved with children.

- *Align policy with current best practices* (see page 10).
- Tap federal funding (TANF, WIA, Title XX, child support enforcement) that can be used to help low-income, nonresidential fathers develop job skills, become/stay gainfully employed and build their parenting skills and confidence.

- As nonresidential fathers are moved into jobs, offer supports for developing nurturing bonds with their children.
- Use program performance measures to assess impact on children, fathers and families.

New programs may not be necessary. Instead, state and local governments should:

- *Integrate low-income fathers (regardless of residential status) into family services* and provide adequate funding as caseloads rise by serving fathers.
- *Facilitate the development of networks between local human service agencies working with low-income men and existing systems for child support*, Head Start and early childhood programs, adult education, corrections, welfare and employment. Existing systems should help fathers know about and access needed local services.
- Assure dedicated attention to proactively managing networks of local service providers and state/local partnerships.
- Sponsor commissions with practitioners and experts that can recommend and champion changes to make state policies more family- and father-friendly.
- Contract with community-based organizations, which are more likely to gain fathers' trust than child support and similar agencies.

Sources: NCSL 2000; Miller et al. 2001; NPNFF 2004; Mincy et al. 2005

Transform child support into family-centered systems in which the foremost goal is to benefit children, and cost-recovery for welfare or foster care benefits is secondary. Persistently low compliance indicates a need for additional tools that will help poor fathers get jobs and pay a reasonable level of child support. States and communities should:

- Strive for a positive relationship with parents in the initial months of establishing a child support order. The system should begin with voluntary compliance and proactively refer noncustodial parents to services that build their capacity to provide for themselves and their children.
- Set child support orders and cap debt at reasonable levels for low-income, noncustodial parents. (For example, Colorado's minimum order is \$50 for parents making less than \$850 per month, and New York caps child support debt at \$500 for low-income, noncustodial parents.)
- Reward steps towards financial responsibility with one or more of the below options.
 - Forgive child support debt (or waive interest and penalties on that debt) for fathers who complete a father-involvement program (as do Iowa, Maryland, Minnesota and Missouri).
 - Suspend child support payments while the father participates in programs and initiatives related to responsible fatherhood.
 - Offer paid training, transitional employment (e.g., community service), etc.
 - Reinstate driver's, professional and occupational licenses for participation in father-involvement programs (if licenses were suspended due to nonpayment of child support).
- Reduce the time required to adjust orders to noncustodial parents' changing circumstances.

- Allow all or part of child support payments to pass through to families on welfare without reducing their TANF benefits (as Wisconsin does). Having some of their payment directly benefit their children would give fathers an incentive to comply.
- Connect child support systems to employment-related services.

Sources: MRI et al. 1999; NCSL 2000; Miller et al. 2001; Sylvester et al. 2002; Legler 2003; Pearson et al. 2003; Sorensen 2003; NPNFF2004; May et al. 2005

Public/Private Partnerships

Governments should join with the private sector to:

- *Stabilize father-involvement supports through partnerships between state government agencies and community-based programs.* Formal connections to state agencies would enable local programs to more effectively help fathers meet their child support obligations.
- Underwrite an effort to develop professional standards of practice relating to father-involvement. Practitioners should be involved in the development and testing of program standards.
- Develop performance measures relating to providing low-income fathers supports they need to build and sustain involvement in their children's lives.

Sources: Reichert 1999; NCSL 2000; Sylvester et al. 2002; May 2004; Mincy et al. 2005

Recommendations Family Service Agencies

Researchers and practitioners recommend family service agencies:

- *Adopt current best practices* (see page 10) and also:
 - Assure staff is knowledgeable, skilled and culturally competent.
 - Use case managers.
 - Hire male caseworkers, especially those who have similar experiences.
 - Create a welcoming, positive office atmosphere.
- Advocate for the kinds of policy changes outlined in the prior section.
- Add low-income, nonresidential fathers as a core service population.
- Retrain staff so they have the knowledge and skills to integrate fathers into service delivery. (With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, Inc. (NPNFF) can sponsor a major skills-building training event for family service organizations or conduct workshops at national conferences.)
- Engage father-clients in seeking solutions and defining desired outcomes.
- Use peers to recruit in places where men gather (such as barbershops, basketball courts, etc.) and cultivate referrals from child support agencies.

Sources: Boggess 2003; Pearson et al. 2003; Hershey et al. 2004; May 2004; Hoffman 2005; Macomber et al. 2005; Mincy et al. 2005; FSA n.d.

RESOURCES

Administration for Children and Families (ACF), US Dept. of Health and Human Services

<http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/index.shtml>

ACF funds state, territory, local and tribal organizations to provide family and child supports, including a wide array of public benefits. ACF is the lead agency in the federal fatherhood initiative.

Annie E. Casey Foundation

<http://www.aecf.org>

With 55+ years of experience in investing in child and family wellbeing, the foundation's website provides a broad collection of research- and practice-based publications on strengthening families, including several on father involvement.

Center for Family Policy and Practice (CFFPP)

<http://www.cffpp.org>

CFFPP strives to create a society in which low-income parents – mothers as well as fathers – are in a position to support their children emotionally, financially and physically. Through technical assistance, policy research and public education, CFFPP works to address the unique barriers affecting low-income fathers, including negative public perception.

Child Trends

<http://www.childtrends.org>

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to improving the lives of children by conducting research and providing science-based information on children and their families.

Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)

<http://www.clasp.org>

CLASP's mission is to improve the economic security, educational and workforce prospects and family stability of low-income parents, children and youth and to secure equal justice for all. The website offers research summaries on child support and fathers.

Family Support America

<http://www.familysupportamerica.org>

Family Support America is the national resource organization for the theory, policy and practice of family support. Its Learning Center offers guidance on father-involvement programs, and its National Family Support Mapping Project enables visitors to identify local or state services in father engagement.

National Center for Fathering

<http://www.fathers.com>

The center is a non-profit research and education organization whose mission is to champion the role of responsible fatherhood by inspiring and equipping men to be more engaged in the lives of children.

National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF)

<http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu>

At the University of Pennsylvania with core support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, NCOFF seeks to expand the knowledge base on father involvement and family development, strengthen practice and inform policy development concerned with child wellbeing. The center's Fathering Indicators Framework (FIF) is an evaluation tool designed to help researchers, practitioners and policymakers measure change in fathering behaviors in relation to child and family wellbeing.

National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI)

<http://www.fatherhood.org>

NFI's mission is to improve the well-being of children by increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible and committed fathers.

National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, Inc. (NPNFF)

<http://www.npnff.org>

NPNFF is the national individual membership organization whose mission is to build the profession of practitioners working to increase the responsible involvement of fathers in the lives of their children. NPNFF (co-)sponsors training and education programs, including an online distance-learning program for a certificate in fatherhood program practice and families studies.

See also Sources Cited, which provides URLs for other key resources.

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This series of policy briefs produced by the Family Strengthening Policy Center (FSPC) seeks to describe a new way of thinking about how to strengthen families raising children in low-income communities and how this approach can and should influence policy. The premise of “family strengthening” in this context, and as championed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is that children do well when cared for by supportive families, which, in turn, do better when they live in vital and supportive communities. The series describes ways in which enhancing connections within families and between families and the institutions that affect them result in better outcomes for children and their families.

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