Fatherhood Research & Practice Network

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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This report offers a set of recommendations about how to build knowledge on effective programs and policies to improve the economic condition of disadvantaged fathers. The reasons for focusing on fathers are multi-faceted. Less-educated men are more likely to become fathers at a relatively early age and opportunities for employment and higher earnings have declined for all less-educated workers in recent decades. This has implications for the wellbeing of both children and fathers since adequate and substantial financial resources afford access to higher quality child care, books, and other resources that promote the healthy development of children as well as reduce parental stress and improve parenting. Further, many less-educated, young parents are unmarried and become involved in the child support system that uses highly automated enforcement tools. These tools are ineffective with nonresidential parents who are not steadily employed in the formal labor market and may actually discourage low-income nonresidential parents from working. Cognizant of this, child support agencies are increasingly looking beyond enforcement tools for ways to engage low-income nonresidential parents and provide or broker services to help them improve their economic circumstances and play positive roles as parents.

Previous and on-going evaluations of employment programs for fathers and disadvantaged men inform this research agenda. Several previous demonstrations and programs appear to have been at least moderately effective at increasing employment or earnings but firm conclusions cannot be drawn. Each of these programs offered a somewhat different mix of services and targeted different groups and some were evaluated using research methods that produce less definitive conclusions. Nonetheless, the numerous, on-going evaluations of employment programs will undoubtedly expand the knowledge base of employment programs for fathers in the next few years. The on-going studies focus on transitional jobs, child support-led employment programs for unemployed nonresidential parents, employment models for ex-offenders and other disadvantaged groups, and an Earned Income Tax Credit for parents paying child support.

In the meantime, however, there are several areas where additional research could shed light on important unanswered questions.

1. **Identify which types of employment services are most effective for which types of fathers.** As fatherhood programming becomes more widespread, it will be crucial to understand "what works best for whom." Much is known from the evaluations of welfare-to-work programs in the 1990s and 2000s but most of these programs targeted parents of families receiving cash assistance, hence were mostly mothers. More needs to be known about what works for fathers; specifically, what mix of employment-related services increase the 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. The mix may involve job readiness classes, job search assistance, job development or job placement services, adult education and GED preparation, subsidized or transitional employment opportunities, and or occupation training. The ease of implementation and cost of each of these services varies widely. Further, more needs to be known about how participants' needs are assessed, how participants are matched to particular services and how particular services are delivered effectively.

2. **Determine which groups of fathers can benefit from combining employment services with other components of fatherhood programs and how the combination should best be structured.** Most fatherhood programs consist of several components. Some are provided by program staff directly and other services are delivered through links with other agencies. Services offered by a fatherhood program may include 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 need, want, or benefit from all of these services. Learning more about the combination of services that most benefit fathers and how programs can best assess those needs could improve program design and management. Similarly, research on the sequence of these services (e.g., a jobs first approach rather than dealing with parenting issues first) could also improve program design.

3. **Target research to learn more about what works best for fathers who have multiple families and 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. Studies could examine how these competing demands affect participation or success in employment programs. 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. 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

4. **Examine whether particular programmatic practices can improve engagement and retention in programs — or in jobs.** A cross-cutting issue that runs through all of these topics is engagement. Even programs that receive referrals from courts struggle to recruit and retain participants. Another common issue concerns participants who find jobs often drop out of programs. These and other recruitment and retention issues could be studied by comparing engagement rates for participants who are exposed to two different sequences of program services, testing the efficacy of a range of participation and retention incentives, and the impact of strategies informed by the principles of behavioral economics. Finally, it might be possible to study whether the institutional structure of programs (e.g., community-based programs relative to large multi-service organizations) affects both engagement and program effectiveness.

While the kinds of studies described above could provide vital information, they will confront several key challenges. The current evidence base about fatherhood programs in general is rather thin so investigating specific components and drilling down details will be challenging. In addition, opportunities for rigorous research (e.g., randomized control trials) are limited by the need to examine longer-term outcomes (e.g., employment and child support payments) and better suited toward examining recruitment and retention strategies that can be investigated within a shorter timeframe. Another limitation is how to measure work outcomes. Previous evaluations often relied on

unemployment insurance (UI) quarterly earnings records, but it is increasingly difficult to obtain state UI earning data. One alternative may be the National Directory of New Hires but it also has limitations. Another limitation to UI data is that it understates actual employment because it does not include jobs in the informal economy. Several studies have found that self-reported data shows higher rates of employment.

In all, there is some evidence that suggests employment programs for disadvantaged fathers do improve participants' employment outcomes at least modestly, and there are a number of ongoing, rigorous studies that 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.