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Addressing Child Support in Fatherhood Programs: Perspectives of Fathers and Service Providers

This qualitative study explores the views that low-income fathers and fatherhood service providers have of the child support system and how these perceptions shape the provision of and men's engagement in fatherhood services. Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with 36 fathers, and telephone interviews with 19 fatherhood service providers. Four themes emerged about perceptions of the child support system: imposing unrealistic financial demands, criminalizing low-income men, discounting paternal viewpoints, and evidencing responsible parenting. A further four themes were concerned with the relationship between the child support system and fatherhood programs: hindering wider service utilization, encouraging engagement, educating and advocating, and reframing child support. Overall the findings suggest that though child support obligations can place a substantial financial and psychological burden on low-income men, fatherhood programs have a valuable role to play in supporting noncustodial fathers in paying child support as one part of their wider paternal role.

Twenty-four million children in the United States, including two-thirds of all African American children, live apart from their biological

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Key Words: child support, fatherhood, parenting programs, poverty, qualitative research.

fathers (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). The role that nonresident fathers play in their children's lives may vary considerably (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013), but federal policy is clear that once paternity is established, assumption of financial responsibility is expected. For some men, the role of financial provider is mandated through the establishment of a formal child support order. Many fathers, however, face substantial barriers to fulfilling their obligations due to their own financial circumstances (Cancian, Meyer, & Han, 2011; Ha, Cancian, Meyer, & Han, 2008). Men who will not or cannot meet their obligations face legal sanction and many times social disapprobation (Maldonado, 2005). African American fathers have in particular been labeled as financially irresponsible and uninvolved, leading to their characterization as "deadbeat dads" (Hamer, 2013). However, the perspectives of the men themselves, about the struggles they face or the assistance they need, are seldom examined.

Recent policy initiatives have constructed a broader parenting role for noncustodial fathers. This development is important, as evidence suggests that the presence of a nurturing father-child relationship is positively associated with favorable child outcomes, whereas financial contributions may not be (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013). Fatherhood programs in particular have been seen as a means of promoting financial responsibility among low-income men, as well as encouraging other forms of positive father involvement (Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010; Martinson & Nightingale, 2008). For example, many programs provide parenting

classes, a strategy that is effective in helping fathers to build healthy relationships with their children (Fletcher, Freeman, & Matthey, 2011). The extent to which programs can equip nonresident fathers to develop a nurturing role at the same time as prioritizing compliance with child support orders is, however, debatable (Martinson & Nightingale, 2008). Visible alliances between child support agencies and fatherhood programs may deter men from receiving any services at all (Anderson, Kohler, & Letiecq, 2002).

To better understand how low-income African American fathers can be best supported to provide for and nurture their children, this study examines the perceptions that these men and that fatherhood service providers have of the child support system and of its impact on the parenting role. Participants' opinions about how fatherhood services should address child support issues are also explored.

Background

Low-Income Fathers and Child Support. The central task of the child support system is to ensure that custodial parents have sufficient resources to care for their children. Child support payments have been shown to have some effect in raising the incomes of female-headed households (Ha et al., 2008). This is especially important for the 39% of African American custodial mothers who live in poverty (Grall, 2013). However, about one third of all noncustodial fathers also live in poverty (Child Trends, 2013), and meeting the requirements of a child support order may place a substantial burden on them (Huang, Mincy, & Garfinkel, 2005). The assumption that these fathers remain poor and unable to pay child support by choice is not supported by the evidence. Child support orders are regressive; low-income parents are expected to contribute a higher percentage of their earnings than more prosperous parents. For fathers who struggle with unemployment or underemployment a child support order may demand more of their income than they have to spare (Ha et al., 2008; Sorenesen & Zibman, 2001).

African American fathers are disproportionately affected by the social and economic conditions that make adhering to a child support order more difficult. Census figures reveal that nearly three times as many African Americans live in poverty as Whites (27.2% and 9.7%, respectively; DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, &

Smith, 2011). For three decades, the unemployment rate of African Americans has been twice that of Whites (Couch & Fairlie, 2010). Moreover, African American men who have found employment continue to face discrimination and racial stereotyping in the workplace, preventing upward mobility (Mong & Roscigno, 2010).

Efforts to collect unpaid child support often rely on severe penalties for noncompliance (Cancian et al., 2011). States may withhold all or parts of a tax refund or suspend the parent's driver's license. Noncompliant parents may even be incarcerated. Moreover, these sanctions may interfere with the ability of low-income nonresident fathers to find gainful employment and therefore ultimately reduce their ability to pay child support (Cancian et al., 2011).

Fatherhood Programs. Over the past two decades federal policy has promoted fatherhood programs, in part, as a means of increasing the number of fathers complying with child support orders. By offering fathers services that increase their capacity and motivation to pay child support, states hope to recoup some of the assistance given to single mothers through welfare (Knox, Cowan, Pape Cowan, & Bildner, 2011). Fatherhood programs also target other forms of father involvement. Since 2006, \$300 million has been dedicated to Responsible Fatherhood (RF) grants with the wider aims of promoting healthy marriage and responsible parenting, especially for low-income men. Agencies that provide services designed to encourage economic stability for fathers such as job training, employment services, and education are among the recipients of RF grants. Many RF initiatives also work with fathers to develop their parenting skills (Knox et al., 2011). Such behavioral parent training can have a positive effect on father involvement and help to increase positive parenting practices, even for nonresident fathers (Caldwell et al., 2014; Fletcher et al., 2011).

Constructing the Role of the Nonresident Father. We use role theory to guide our exploration of how social policies and programs shape societal and individual perceptions of what a father should be. Role theorists argue that social positions and identities bring with them certain expectations about behavior that individuals hold for themselves and others like them (Biddle, 1986; Sarbin & Allen, 1954). The role that low-income fathers are expected to play is, in

part, shaped by social policy. The child support system defines the role that a responsible father must play as being primarily about financial provision (Roy, 1999). The aim of many fatherhood programs, to promote compliance with child support, undergirds this conceptualization of the fathering role, whereas other programs broaden it to include wider forms of involvement (Curran & Abrams, 2000). When the fathering role is equated solely with that of financial provider, living up to its expectations is likely to prove problematic for many noncustodial fathers who have limited resources.

When individuals find themselves unable to perform successfully in a valued social role they are theorized to experience role strain (Bowman & Sanders, 1998). This concept is used to describe objective difficulties faced in fulfilling a particular role and subjective reactions to these difficulties. Role strain for low-income fathers can therefore be conceptualized as the limitations that poverty places on their ability to provide for their children and as the psychological distress they may experience as a result of being unable to fulfill their desired role (Schindler, 2010). Role strain is likely to be especially problematic for low-income urban African American fathers who face multiple structural barriers, including subpar schooling and joblessness, to providing financially for their children (Wilson, 1987). For those African American fathers who ascribe to traditional models of masculinity that emphasize power and control, the experiences associated with nonresident fathering, such as conflict with the child's mother and negative interactions with the child support system, may lead to depression and other negative health outcomes (Caldwell, Antonakas, Tsuchiya, Assari, & De Loney, 2013).

Low-Income Fathers' Perceptions of Child Support. The handful of qualitative studies that have explored men's experiences in the child support system suggest that it has a considerable impact on their ability to fulfill the paternal role they aspire to. In addition to asserting that payments are unrealistically high, many fathers also argue that the system ignores contextual factors that might explain their inability to pay (Baron & Sylvester, 2002; Jordan-Zachery, 2009; Waller & Plotnick, 2001). For example, participants in an ethnographic study of Latino and African American noncustodial fathers reported their own financial problems as one reason for the

size of their child support arrearages (Becerra, Thomas, & Ong, 2001). Study participants argued that they could not realistically make enough money to pay what they owed and meet their own living expenses as well.

Other studies have indicated that perceptions of child support and of responsible fathering are closely tied. Waller (2010) described how men draw a distinction between fathers who willingly accept their economic responsibility and those who do not. Participants in this study believed that men who will not support their children voluntarily have demonstrated that they are "irresponsible" fathers (p. 111) and that only they should be subject to legal orders. In contrast, voluntary contributions to the mother and child, whether cash or in-kind gifts, were seen as expressions of paternal love, and therefore preferable.

A further qualitative study of 10 African American men discussed the ways in which men who had experienced conflict within the child support system felt themselves to be "emasculated" (Jordan-Zachery, 2009, p. 208). This perceived disrespect to their status as fathers and as men was also attributed to the tendency of the courts to view all fathers as criminals until determined otherwise. Furthermore, the men in this study believed that child support was detrimental to them fulfilling their parental role, some pulled away from their relationships with their children after receiving an order.

In light of evidence about the financial and psychological strain placed on low-income fathers by child support, it is perhaps unsurprising that it emerges as a theme in studies about perceptions of fatherhood programs (Anderson et al., 2002; Baron & Sylvester, 2002). In one study of low-income African American fathers' experiences in an RF program, participants expressed their lack of understanding of the child support system as a whole (Anderson et al., 2002). Moreover, the study participants were concerned about how little effort the Child Support Agency (CSA) put into understanding their experiences as low-income fathers. Participants believed that other men would be reluctant to attend RF programs because of their perceived association with the CSA.

The voices of practitioners who work with low-income noncustodial parents are rarely heard in research literature. In an exception, Baron and Sylvester (2002) interviewed service providers in four cities about the challenges

faced by low-income fathers and the agencies that serve them. These providers noted the frustration that men in the child support system experienced and believed that many of their complaints were legitimate. They were also concerned that close ties between fatherhood and child support agencies could deter men from accessing services, but expressed hope that they could act as advocates for the fathers they served within the system. On the whole, the father-serving organizations in the study considered the child support agencies to be valuable collaborators.

Despite the centrality of fatherhood programs in recent policy to promote low-income fathers' financial provision, relatively little research has explored the experiences of key stakeholders in these services. In particular, it is important to know more about the experiences of African American men, given the disproportionate obstacles they face in providing for their children. Moreover, many questions remain about how these programs might best address child support at the same time as encouraging the development of parenting skills and a more holistic paternal role for noncustodial fathers. This study used qualitative interviews and focus groups with fathers and service providers to help fill this gap in the literature.

METHOD

This study was part of a larger project designed to develop and test a strategy to engage low-income African American fathers in a parenting intervention known as Triple P (Sanders, Markie-Dadds, & Turner, 2003). The data reported here were collected from three sources: fathers in focus groups, fathers in individual interviews, and fatherhood program providers via telephone interviews. Each stage of the data collection explored different domains. Focus groups were used to explore father perceptions of parenting programs. Individual interviews were conducted to find out more about the fathers' views of their fatherhood role and interviewees' own experiences of being parented. Provider interviews were concerned with methods of recruiting fathers to programs and with the men's engagement with those programs.

Semistructured interview guides were developed that used open-ended questions to elicit participant views about the domains of interest to the larger study. Each guide was informed by

themes emerging from the previous stage of data collection and contained questions unique to that stage. Interviewers used the guides to ensure that all domains were covered but were free to ask further questions to probe for more information. Although participants were not asked questions directly related to child support, it emerged as a pervasive theme across all methods of data collection. In focus groups, child support was principally discussed following the questions "What things might get in the way of you participating in a parenting program?" and "What would you need to help you participate in parenting programs?" In individual interviews fathers talked about child support when asked, "What do you think gets in the way of having an ideal relationship with your child?" Service providers discussed child support in the context of the questions, "What is the most effective way you recruit fathers to your program?" and "In your opinion, what makes fathers stop attending a parenting program?"

Father Recruitment, Sample, and Procedure

Fathers were eligible for the study if they self-identified as African American, were older than age 18, and were the biological father of at least one child between the ages of 4 and 12. Although resident and nonresident fathers were admitted into the study, nonresident fathers had to have contact with their children at least twice a month. Prospective participants were recruited via flyers distributed at locations known to be frequented by our target population, such as barbershops, restaurants, retail stores, and social service agencies.

Five focus groups were conducted with 29 total participants. One group had two members; the others ranged between 4 and 10. Groups were held at a community-based fatherhood agency, lasted about 90 minutes, and were conducted at various times (evenings, weekdays, and Saturdays). Participants had a mean age of 37 and were mostly single (51.7%) or divorced/separated (34.5%). The remainder (13.8%) were married or living with a partner. The majority (72.4%) had a high school education or less and were unemployed (62.1%). Groups were administered by a facilitator and a note taker, both African American women, who had been trained by a qualitative expert. Following each group, research team meetings were used to refine the interview guide and to

review the congruency of the facilitator and note taker's observations of the participants.

After all focus groups had been completed, 12 fathers were randomly selected from their participants to take part in individual interviews. As new themes were still emerging after these interviews (i.e., saturation had not been reached), seven more fathers were recruited and interviewed. Our sample of fathers therefore included 17 men who only participated in focus groups, 7 men who only participated in individual interviews, and 12 men who participated in both, for a total sample size of 36. Unfortunately, due to missing demographic data from three of the fathers who were interviewed but did not participate in the focus groups, we could not determine how similar the seven additional fathers were to focus group participants. Interviews were conducted by trained interviewers either at the same community agency, or at another convenient location such as the father's home or a restaurant. The focus groups and interviews were audiorecorded and later transcribed. Participants were informed of their rights as research participants, and informed consent was obtained before each interview or focus group.

Program Provider Recruitment, Sample, and Procedure

Telephone interviews were conducted with program providers employed at stand-alone fatherhood agencies, or in fatherhood programs embedded within larger social service agencies. An exhaustive list of service providers was constructed from the National Fatherhood Initiative website, through an additional Internet search, and from locally known providers. To ensure geographic representation, the 183 programs identified were stratified into four regions. An equal number of providers from each region were randomly selected. From the 36 agencies invited, 15 were successfully contacted and agreed to participate, resulting in a response rate of 42%. Nineteen individuals from these agencies were interviewed. Male ($n = 11$) and female ($n = 8$) service providers were interviewed. Most participants were African American ($n = 9$) or White ($n = 8$), with the remaining two identifying as Hispanic. The average age was 48.5, and nearly all ($n = 17$) had a college or graduate degree. The majority of those interviewed ($n = 15$) provided services directly to fathers; four held managerial positions. Interviews were

conducted by trained members of the research team and lasted between 20 and 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis. Peer debriefing and support meetings, where emerging themes could be discussed, were used to reduce researcher bias (Padgett, 2008). Furthermore, analytic triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple coders (Padgett, 2008). Two or more team members coded each transcript, and team meetings were used to ensure coders had applied the same code to the same passage. The coding team consisted of two doctoral students, an master's of social work-level practitioner employed by the partner agency, and the study principal investigator. A cultural anthropologist provided consultation throughout the process.

Focus groups, father interviews, and provider interviews were all analyzed separately and different codebooks developed for each stage. The analysis followed an inductive approach that allowed themes to emerge from the data (Krueger, 1997). Multiple coders individually read focus group or interview transcripts and then met together to discuss the themes they had found and to develop a preliminary codebook. Larger "parent" codes were first used to capture broad themes; these were then split into more narrowly defined "child" codes (Creswell, 2012). In each of the three codebooks, child support emerged as a parent code. Passages that had been assigned this code from each type of participant were then compared with each other, and further child codes were assigned. The team continued to meet to refine the codebook as more transcripts were read. Once it was determined that no new insights were being generated through this process, the analysis was considered to have reached the saturation point. No further data collection was undertaken and only minor alterations were subsequently made to the codebook.

Padgett (2008) noted that qualitative researchers often "draw on several theoretical frameworks and concepts as 'lenses' through which the study's data and ideas are refracted" (p. 13). In this study, role theory was used as a lens through which to explore the themes that emerged within the child support parent code and to understand the way that the themes relate to each other. For example, the concept of role

strain was used to guide our exploration of the psychological distress experienced by many men in their interactions with the child support system. In the results presented here, data from the focus groups and individual interviews are combined and compared to that from the service providers.

FINDINGS

Four themes emerged from the data about the ways in which the child support system was seen to affect the parenting role of low-income African American fathers. These were (a) imposing unrealistic financial demands, (b) criminalizing low-income men, (c) discounting paternal viewpoints, and (d) evidencing responsible parenting. A further four themes emerged about the role of fatherhood programs in supporting low-income African American fathers who are involved in the child support system. These were (a) hindering wider service utilization, (b) encouraging engagement, (c) educating and advocating, and (d) reframing child support.

Perceptions of the Child Support System

Imposing Unrealistic Financial Demands. The fathers in this sample invariably believed child support payments to be too high in light of their financial circumstances. They thought that it would be necessary to work two or three jobs to meet payments, and even then they could still be behind on what they owed. The struggle to make payments could also diminish the amount of money that a father had for discretionary spending on his child. One father, for example, described how he could not afford to have his child who lived in a different state come to visit:

You know I don't have no extra money for [child]. I don't have any extra money. It all goes to child support. I probably got another maybe three or four months left worth of money in the bank. ... I'm already behind. They started me behind.

Although service providers did not reflect a personal belief that the size of payments was unreasonable, they were aware that their service users commonly held this idea. For example, one service provider explained that many men in his program said that they struggled so much to pay child support that they were left with too little money to support themselves.

Criminalizing Low-Income Men. The fathers were aware that they could end up in jail if they did not comply with a child support order, and reported cases that they knew of where this had happened. One father who had been incarcerated for another issue described his reaction upon meeting men in prison who were there for noncompliance with a child support order:

When I was in prison, guys would come to jail and I would say, "What you here for?" They say, "Child support." I said, "Child support? In the penitentiary? ... What else did you do?" Cause I just knew he was lying. But that's all. I said, "Laws got to be changed. Somebody's got to step up to the plate."

The anger the fathers expressed at the potential for the child support system to criminalize noncompliant fathers was explained by the assertion that an "innocent man" could be made a "convicted felon.... Just because the fact he ain't got no job." Because payments were considered to be unfair and beyond many fathers' means, men were being convicted for their inability to pay and not for intentionally breaking the law.

Service providers also referred to the severe consequences for fathers who remained noncompliant. Although most spoke of this in the context of helping men meet their obligations and to stay out of jail, a minority pointed to aspects of the system that they felt were unnecessarily punitive. For example, one provider described how in his state the system is "very complex, it's very punitive. You know in our state they pile interest on arrears here, one percent per month." It should be noted that this provider, like all the others, believed that his program participants should meet their child support obligations, no matter how unfair the system seemed to be. Another provider described how his attitude toward the sanctions the system was able to impose changed after spending time working with primarily low-income African American fathers and understanding the economic challenges they face:

I think I had lots of biases and prejudiced mindsets that I attributed to the way the child support system was, and when I would like see those posters that they have and they would say "wanted for child support," and then I would say "Yeah, they need to lock them up. Deadbeat this that and the other." Once I got to working in this field ... it really

changed my perception and my perspective on the whole child support system ... it gave me a lot more compassion, a lot more understanding.

Discounting Paternal Viewpoints. Fathers commonly felt that the child support system is biased toward women. Men reported that even when they paid child support “faithfully,” the word of their children’s mothers was still valued more highly than their own. One father believed that “the system is designed not to keep just Black folks down but men in general.” His reasoning was that the way the system works allowed his financial contribution to be hidden from his child, who had no idea about the money his father paid monthly. When the interviewee told his son about the child support he paid, the child’s mother grew extremely angry. She had not wanted their son to know about his father’s financial contributions. Although only one service provider himself contended that the system was unfairly designed to prioritize the needs of mothers, many recognized this belief in the men they worked with. In the words of one provider, “they feel that they’re not respected as fathers [because] the system leans more towards, favors mothers.”

Evidencing Responsible Parenting. Inasmuch as it affords a means of providing for their children, few fathers were opposed to child support as a broader concept. Meeting child support payments was seen by a number of fathers in this study as at least part evidence of responsible parenting. Conversely, the men criticized fathers who they saw as not even attempting to meet their obligations for complaining about the system but not making any effort to provide financially for their children. The real point of contention was for fathers who believed strongly in the provider role but were still unable to comply with their child support order because of their low income. As one father explained:

I’m not against the child support system because I know there are guys that just don’t give a damn. They will make the child or whatever, or children, and just go on to the next little spot. That’s not good. But for those of us who really try ... it just makes it hard man.

Service providers also echoed this sentiment, noting that even though they struggled financially, most men wanted to “do the right thing.”

Child Support in Fatherhood Programs

Hindering Wider Service Utilization. Service providers and fathers saw the association of fatherhood programs with child support enforcement as hindering men from signing up for parenting services. Although most of the fathers interviewed personally drew the distinction between fatherhood programs and child support enforcement, they believed that other fathers were not aware of this separation. As one father said, “A lot of them don’t know what support basically represents. They think child support is fathers support.” While discussing what might incentivize fathers to attend parenting programs, one focus group member described the suspicion with which many fathers approach information they receive about parenting programs, “You can hold a block party and say it’s for the fathers support, and the first thing they will think is he’s signing up for child support. So they’re not going to come.” More general fatherhood services are seen as a smokescreen for the real aim of enforcing child support payment. The previously quoted father’s solution was that information concerning the program, such as flyers distributed in the neighborhood, should be explicit about the content and aim of the program. Service providers instead discussed the need to build relationships of trust with their clients, making clear their separation from child support:

[Agency staff] try to form a bond with these individuals. And by doing that, it makes them more easier to trust us because in this field where warrants are issued if you don’t pay your child support. We don’t turn anybody in, so we have to build their trust.

Both types of respondent were ultimately concerned that potential program participants would be too scared to attend a parenting program because of a fear of facing up to child support issues.

Fatherhood service providers also identified pressures resulting from the child support system as a key reason why some fathers drop out of parenting programs. They believed that for some fathers the mental taxation of dealing with multiple systems resulted in intolerable strain: “Sometimes they feel overwhelmed in their situation ... you know if they’re involved with child support ... they do feel overwhelmed and that is one reason why they will bail out on us.”

Another provider saw discouragement resulting from being behind in child support payments as translating into program attendance, speaking of fathers who “just give up.” Lastly, one provider was concerned that in the light of the pressures of unemployment and inability to pay child support, the material presented in wider parenting programs became irrelevant.

Encouraging Engagement. Providers believed that conflict with the child support system could be the stimulus that brought fathers into their programs, where they would receive help not only with their immediate problem, but also with wider parenting issues. They thought that the distress that fathers felt in their predicament provided an opening to promote their services:

We’re basically saying, “We may be able to help you if you are having issues with child support or if you need some type of advocacy to help you navigate through the child support system.” ... Most of the times, people are very receptive to getting help.

Recruiting in this way often meant having a physical presence in the family courts and at child support offices. Service providers reported leaving recruitment materials at these locations and sending staff members to recruit fathers on the spot. Fatherhood agencies also worked to establish close relationships with the courts, and with child support offices, and relied on the proactive cooperation of the professionals that work there:

Our child support enforcement office manager has for a long time been an advocate of the noncustodial parents that come into her office ... and recognized a long time ago that they were not as connected and felt alienated ... that office has been a source of referrals and has been open to our [agency staff].

This service provider saw the child support office as a valuable resource, noting that they were their “closest partner.”

Educating and Advocating. Fatherhood agencies were seen by both types of respondents as ideally having a dual role of educating noncustodial fathers about the child support system and advocating for them within it. Both groups agreed that many fathers were uninformed about the intricacies of the system in their own states.

These assertions were supported in our interviews with fathers, some of whom made statements about the system that were not true. For example, echoing a common misperception, one focus group father was sure that payment amounts could only be changed every 3 years, even if the noncustodial parent became unemployed. In fact, temporary immediate relief may be sought following a change in financial circumstances to avoid the accumulation of arrearages. Fathers believed that fatherhood support agencies could play a part in changing misperceptions about the child support system for men like them. Talking about how a fatherhood program had educated him about the system, one father explained:

I didn’t know anything about, you know ... my rights, my so-called rights in this process. ... I had educated other people once I started going to the [fatherhood program] and I found out what I knew. I told like five, six guys about the information. And it just blew their mind. You know, they had options. I thought I just had to lay down for the system.

Service providers concurred that there is a need for noncustodial fathers to be educated about how to interact with the system and for false understandings to be corrected. They acknowledged how complex the system is and thought it unsurprising that fathers needed to be taught about their rights and responsibilities in it. One provider explained that fathers kept on coming to his program because of their perceived need to learn about the child support system:

You know, learning some of the skills here, educating yourself about how to modify your child support if you lose a job. I mean the kind of nuts and bolts education because you know until you’re in child support court most of what the guys think they know, they may know, but it’s nowhere close to the truth.

Teaching fathers about the mechanics of the system was also seen as a means of reducing the psychological stress that many program participants reported in the face of enforcement. One provider believed that by explicating the state child support laws, he could mitigate some of the anger of fathers who believed their payments were too high. In the words of another provider, “We have to get them to understand how to navigate that process ... that’s frustrating for a lot of guys and they just give up and have

no hope for themselves.” Teaching the men to navigate the system was seen as a means of combating hopelessness.

According to the service providers, fathers need to be supported in the face of a system that they feel is working against them. As one provider stated, “Men who feel persecuted by the system are looking for an advocate or a mentor or coach to help them understand or navigate the system.” The advocate’s role is first to be a guide through hostile territory. They are somebody to “walk you through the journey.” In addition to this personal support, the advocate may also speak for the father in communications with the child support enforcement office, advocating his position with enforcement professionals and making sure that all relevant questions are asked.

Reframing Child Support. Both types of respondents suggested that fatherhood programs should place child support within a larger picture of what it means to be a father. Fathers believed that programs should address issues other than child support enforcement. Service providers wanted participants to understand it as part of a more holistic support of the child.

Although the majority of fathers who spoke on this issue saw the need for further education about the child support system, they did not believe that it should be the focus of fatherhood services. One man recounted his experience at a program that brought in speakers from the CSA, but only devoted a small portion of the class to parenting. In his opinion, discussion should be focused on the children. Facilitators should make sure to “keep it about them.” Another father felt that father-focused parenting programs do a disservice to fathers who are really trying to meet their responsibilities when they make child support the focal issue of fatherhood. He asked:

What is it that the support group could teach us or show us how to engage in a better relationship or a more positive role when it comes to being a parent? I think that would be just great. It’s not even about the money.

Although the fathers saw a place for the discussion of child support in fatherhood programs, they thought the curriculum should address parenting as a much wider role.

Service providers tried to reframe paying child support as being about ensuring the well-being of the child, instead of just meeting

a financial responsibility. A minority of service providers took a more directive approach to teaching this message. For example, one program facilitator reported teaching his participants that “child support is child support. It’s not a bill. It’s not a ball and chain. These are your kids.” A more common approach was to keep the group conversation “child centered.” One service provider, for example, explained that when discussion turns to issues of child support he redirects the conversation:

It’s very easy for them to leave their children out of these conversations but I bring it back to the child. How does the child, how does this affect [them] negatively and positively? What you do or don’t do, how does that affect your child?

Providers did not undermine fathers’ responsibilities to pay child support; such tactics were seen to instead promote compliance with child support payments. By putting the child at the center, payments were reframed as good parenting. For example, a program manager explained the approach that his facilitator took:

The guys that we get, many of them won’t pay their child support because of some idiosyncrasy. But once he began to teach them, and get them to think about their children, what they need to do to become better parents, they began paying their child support.

The provider also explained how the child and mother also benefit indirectly from the program as their financial needs are met as the result of a change in the father’s parenting behavior.

DISCUSSION

In exploring perceptions of the child support system and its relationship to fatherhood programs, this study presented a complex picture of what it means to provide for a child as a non-custodial father, and of the role of fatherhood services in meeting the needs of low-income fathers. In common with participants in previous qualitative studies, the fathers we interviewed expressed overwhelmingly negative experiences of the child support system. They felt that it imposed unrealistic financial demands, that it made them into criminals simply because they were poor, and that it silenced their voices in favor of the opinion of the child’s mother. According to these fathers, only men who determinedly take no responsibility for their children

should be subject to a formal child support order. Service providers were themselves less critical of the system, except for its tendency to impose criminal sanctions on men who do not keep up with their payments. They did, however, recognize the negative perception that their program participants had of the system, and noted its potentially detrimental effect on fathers' relationships with their children and on the success of their own programming.

We used role theory and the associated concept of role strain to illuminate the themes we found and to understand the way that they related to each other. A common thread between the themes concerning perceptions of child support is that the system serves to distinguish between fathers who are judged to be successful and those who are not. In effect, the system defines the expected paternal role. Although current rhetoric indicates that responsible fathers are involved in their children's intellectual, emotional, and financial well-being (The White House, 2012), involvement in child support seemed to reduce the paternal role to financial provision for our participants. The message they had received was that responsible fathers pay their child support; irresponsible fathers are those who fall behind. This accords with the hypotheses of previous studies that social policy serves to define the paternal role (Curran & Abrams, 2000; Roy, 1999).

Role strain was conceptualized in our analysis first as the limitations placed by poverty on low-income fathers' ability to fulfill the desired paternal role. In line with this, the fathers we interviewed and those attending the service providers' programs were exasperated by child support demands they believed they had no hope of being able to meet. Second, role strain was interpreted as the subjective reactions fathers have to obstacles they encounter in fulfilling their desired fathering role. The fathers in this study were angry because they felt the child support system discounted their viewpoints and inappropriately criminalized them. They felt disrespected because of their race and their gender. In light of evidence that experiences of discrimination are disruptive to the mental health of nonresident African American fathers, services aiming to support them may need to address the psychological needs of these men in addition to their economic needs (Caldwell et al., 2013).

Implications for Fatherhood Programs

Although many fatherhood programs were born out of policy designed to help fathers take financial responsibility for their children, most provide wider services such as parent training. These classes can teach fathers how to manage their children's behavior and to build healthy relationships with them (Fletcher et al., 2011). The findings of this study, however, suggest that the strain resulting from involvement in the child support system could prevent low-income fathers from receiving these potentially beneficial services. Men who are overwhelmed by the financial and mental pressures of child support demands may not have the perseverance to remain in classes that teach strategies for more positive involvement.

Should agencies therefore leave child support obligations unmentioned in their programs? Other themes that emerged from our data indicate that this is not the case. Engaging with the CSA and addressing child support directly may in fact be instrumental in supporting low-income fathers. Our interviews suggest that there are two key roles that fatherhood agencies can play. First, they can help fathers to fulfill their role as mandated by the child support system. Second, they can play a part in redefining the role expected of low-income noncustodial fathers.

Fatherhood programs can help men to fulfill their provider role by educating participants about their rights and responsibilities within the system. Classes that discuss the intricacies of the system have previously been found to be effective in increasing knowledge of its workings in low-income men (Pate, 2002). This could have the benefit of preventing men falling behind on their payments in the first place; for example, by making them aware of the steps needed to adjust an order following a change in employment. Moreover, education could serve to reduce some of the psychological distress resulting from fathers' feeling that they have no control in the system. Given that providers identified being overwhelmed by the system as a reason why men may fail to engage with their services, incorporating education about child support may have the added benefit of increasing long-term attendance rates of fatherhood programs.

In addition to noting that issues with child support could be the impetus that drew some men to their services, service providers emphasized the importance of engaging directly with the CSA. Many referred positively to their

relationship with the CSA, and to their ability to advocate for their service users within it. Their perspectives accord with previous research that the benefits of maintaining close relationships with child support agencies are substantial. Close relationships can facilitate education, increase referrals, and help in establishing manageable payment strategies (Martinson & Nightingale, 2008).

Perhaps the key role that fatherhood agencies can play is in redefining the fatherhood role for low-income and minority fathers. By emphasizing the emotional, nurturing, and social aspects of fathering, as well as financial provision, program providers may help to reduce some of the role strain that they observe fathers to experience. Positive, culturally-based conceptualizations of the male role have indeed been found to be protective to the mental health of African American fathers (Caldwell et al., 2013). Service providers described two ways in which they did this. First, they reframed child support as being about caring for the child over and above being a financial obligation. Second, they deliberately expanded conversations that became overly focused on negative perceptions of child support to include wider issues of parenting. These strategies may be useful for service providers seeking to empower men who have felt their fatherhood role to be shrunk down to whether they pay child support. Moreover, given that quality nonresident father involvement may be more beneficial to positive child outcomes than financial provision (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013), encouraging men to expand their parenting role may have a positive impact on child well-being.

Reframing child support as being primarily an expression of care for the child, and including it in wider discussions of parenting, may ultimately serve to increase compliance with support orders. This was clearly the hope of some of the providers we interviewed who chose to focus on the positive impact that child support could have on the child instead of on the problems it caused for the father. There is also support in the empirical literature for directing services to activities designed to create more positive relationships between fathers and their children as a means of promoting child support compliance. Several studies have shown that fathers who are more involved with their children pay more child support (Huang, 2009; Nepomnyaschy, 2007).

Implications for Policy

The themes emerging from this study suggest that fatherhood programs, a central part of RF policy, can play a valuable role in supporting low-income African American men to become the parents most of them aspire to be. Although practitioners can take specific steps to ensure that the pressures of child support do not prevent men from receiving wider parenting services, these do not fix the underlying problem. Fatherhood programs cannot make up for inefficiencies and injustices within the child support system itself.

For low-income men to become empowered to provide for their children without themselves becoming destitute, or unnecessarily incurring criminal charges, states might be encouraged to make certain changes to their child support enforcement policies. First, child support orders should be realistic. Evidence shows that low-income fathers are expected to pay high percentages of their income in child support, and that high rates are associated with low compliance (Huang et al., 2005). Second, child support agencies should not only have mechanisms in place for speedy adjustment of orders following a change in fathers' employment, but more efforts should be made to educate men about their rights in the system. Third, sanctions for nonpayment should not reduce men's capacity to earn a living wage or discourage them from being involved in their children's lives in an informal capacity. There is some evidence that strong child support enforcement may reduce the amount of in-kind support that fathers hand directly to their children or ex-partners. This is especially true for African American men who provide more in-kind support than other fathers (Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2010). In line with the views of the participants in this study, we do not question the importance of child support in raising the incomes of custodial mothers and in reducing child poverty, but rather the seeming intractability of the system for men who find themselves at the bottom of the economic ladder.

Implications for Research

This study provides several potential avenues for future research. First, future studies could quantitatively investigate the association between child support enrollment, fatherhood role perception, and role strain, leading to a better

understanding of the psychological needs of low-income noncustodial fathers. Second, there is a need for further intervention studies. Evaluations of fatherhood services should consider the impact of teaching parenting skills on child support compliance and other father involvement outcomes. Furthermore, previous research has shown that coparenting interventions can increase father involvement and strengthen relationships even for unmarried parents (Cowan et al., 2010). Future research should also, therefore, examine the effect of addressing child support in interventions that target both parents. It is possible that if custodial mothers had a greater understanding of the child support system and the challenges low-income fathers face in making payments, more positive relationships between parents could be promoted, and some of the role strain experienced by noncustodial fathers reduced. Lastly, further qualitative studies should consider the perspectives of fathers from other ethnic groups, as well as those who have limited or no contact with their children.

Limitations

The qualitative methods employed in this study allowed for an in-depth exploration of fathers' and service providers' perceptions of the child support system and fatherhood programs. However, as all the fathers in this study were sampled from one city, the findings may not be generalizable to men who live in other areas. Due to the nature of the larger study, all of the fathers also had at least some contact with their children. Because child support compliance may be associated with the amount of contact that fathers have with their children (Nepomnyaschy, 2007), the findings cannot be presumed to be applicable to fathers who have no contact with their children. Additionally, as the fathers self-selected into the study, they may have had a greater identification with or interest in the fathering role than other men.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided compelling evidence that although low-income men generally believe that providing financially for their children is central to their fathering role, the child support system itself unfairly labels men like them as deficient fathers. Fatherhood programs should therefore consistently address child support

issues within their programs and maintain communication with enforcement agencies so that they can advocate most effectively for their participants. However, tackling child support issues in isolation from a broader conceptualization of father involvement may alienate men who are fearful of the sanctions levied by the system, as well as contributing to the cultural trope that low-income men are uninvolved with the emotional and social lives of their children and need to be coerced into taking financial responsibility for them. By promoting other forms of involvement, even by fathers who cannot meet their current orders, or who owe substantial arrearages, fatherhood programs may also contribute toward the positive social, emotional, and educational development of the child.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Points of view or opinions in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the CDC.

Support for this project was provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (1U01 CF001627-01).

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