

CENTER FOR FAMILY POLICY AND PRACTICE

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POLICY BRIEFING

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Analysis of Fatherhood Programs Identifies Common Key Findings

Findings from five early fatherhood demonstration projects have been analyzed in a brief from the Urban Institute. The projects were intended to address issues faced by noncustodial parents and to encourage the payment of child support and involvement with children. They produced many of the same findings. These have been sorted and summarized in order to inform current and future fatherhood programs. The ten key findings are:

- **Low-Income Fathers and Mothers Face Similar and Significant Barriers.**
Program administrators routinely found that poorly educated minorities with limited job opportunities made up a disproportionate share of low-income non-resident fathers. In addition to employment barriers such as health issues, substance abuse, housing instability, lack of transportation and mental health problems, prior involvement with the criminal justice system affected a large proportion of fathers in the programs.
- **Recruitment and Enrollment Are Key Challenges.**
Difficulty meeting enrollment goals was common to all of the programs. Despite the large population of low-income noncustodial parents with social service needs, enrollment was a challenge because of: narrow eligibility criteria; lack of trust in the organization operating the program; fear of involvement with the child support agency; mismatch between program services and fathers' needs; difficulty acquiring referrals from other agencies; and poorly designed recruitment procedures.
- **Being a Good Father Is Important to Nonresident Fathers.**
Program components that focused on relationships with children were valued highly by participants, and served as an important incentive to participate. Peer support groups consistently received high marks from participants for the opportunity they provided to share information on rights and responsibilities, on parenting, and to clarify points of confusion.
- **Programs Had Difficulty Establishing Employment Services That Improved How Nonresident Fathers Fared in the Labor Market.**
Participants reported that their desire for a job attracted them to the program, and staff reported that participants viewed employment as critical for improving their lives. Outcomes fell short, however, because of a common lack of work experience or skills. Immediate needs, such as child support payments, precluded participation in long-term training.
- **Child Support-Related Services Are a Critical Program Component.**
Programs can serve as an important resource for the father, providing information on rights and responsibilities regarding child support and visitation and encouraging formal payments that reduce risk of child support debt and enforcement actions.
- **Child Support Orders Are Often Set at Levels Above What Nonresident Fathers Can Reasonably Be Expected to Pay.**
Programs found that up to 60 percent of men had child support orders that represented more than half of their monthly earnings. Such high orders make full payment of child support unrealistic and lead to child support debt.

- **Child Support Enforcement Agencies Need to Collaborate with Fatherhood Programs and Respond to the Circumstances of Low-Income Fathers.**

While a drawback of involving the child support agency was that it resulted in a reluctance to participate for many fathers, there were also important advantages. These included factors such as: the involvement of the child support system allowed it to work better for fathers, child support offices were sometimes an important referral source for programs, and there was a better chance that child support orders would be realistic when established.

- **Co-Parenting Issues Need to Be Addressed.**

For many participants, there was significant frustration or conflict with their child's mother, but few took part in mediation services when offered. These relationships need to be understood, particularly since they can be quite complicated and involve multiple partners with additional children.

- **Lack of Long-Term Sustainability Inhibits the Development of Program Capacity and Innovation.**

Few of the programs analyzed for the report exist today, in large part because funding could not be sustained. Long-term funding is difficult to secure, yet crucial for the maintenance of services and institutional connections. Fatherhood programs that receive funding under the Deficit Reduction Act will need to pursue long-term funding sources in order to ensure program operation beyond the funded five-year period.

- **Systemic Change Is Difficult.**

While programs may have been successful in securing the cooperation of a child support agency, these local policy changes (such as an arrears reduction program) did not tend to result in changes that were implemented statewide.

The brief, *Ten Key Findings from Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives*, is available from the Urban Institute at www.urban.org.

Family Income Instability Is on the Rise

A recent Economic Policy Institute briefing paper examines the level of income instability for American families over the past 35 years and finds that families' incomes are increasingly vulnerable to fluctuation. For the analysis, several studies and datasets were analyzed. The authors found the following:

- Male earnings have become less stable, and family income instability has increased over the last three decades. Despite a drop in the late 1990s, increases prior to 1985, and again in recent years, have led to an overall rise in instability.
- Family income instability is extremely high. Almost one in ten non-elderly adults experienced a family income drop of 50 percent or more during the early 2000s, and the rate of workers whose earnings dropped by 50 percent or more during this period is even higher.
- The earnings of male workers have become particularly less stable since the 1970s.
- Cash transfer income volatility decreased, a probable result of declining cash assistance caseloads that resulted in a higher proportion of disabled individuals, with long term stable cash transfer income, receiving government aid.
- Total family income volatility for low-income families increased significantly during the second half of the 1990s, as low-income families struggled to find and keep low-wage work.
- Even as family incomes are fluctuating more sharply, families are working harder and more hours for only modestly more income.
- Families are experiencing related financial issues of debt, bankruptcy, and mortgage

foreclosure, and are unable to save as a result of the income instability. So far this decade, the personal savings rate has fallen from 9.1 percent to 1.7 percent. In the same period, debt as a percent of personal income essentially doubled, from 60 to 100 percent, and by 2006, it approached 120 percent of income. For families with incomes between two and six times the federal poverty level and headed by working-age adults, more than half have no net financial assets and nearly four in five middle-class families do not have sufficient assets to cover 75 percent of essential living expenses for even three months, should their income disappear.

The authors point out that a result of this instability is that workers and their families are bearing more risk, even as other economic indicators have become more stable. Income fluctuations cause anxiety and discontent, and increased borrowing, in addition to direct financial hardship.

The report, *The Rising Instability of American Family Incomes, 1969-2004: Evidence from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics*, is available from the Economic Policy Institute, www.epi.org.

On a related note: The U.S. Department of Labor reports that the unemployment rate rose to 5.5 percent in May, from a previous rate of 5 percent, the largest monthly spike in more than two decades, and 49,000 jobs were lost.

Prison and Jail Inmate Population Numbers

A recent U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics report on prison and jail inmates provides the following information on the status of inmate populations at midyear 2007:

- The overall imprisonment rate (the number of persons incarcerated in state and federal prisons per 100,000 U.S. residents) was 509 per 100,000. The adult male incarceration rate was 957 per 100,000; for females, the rate was 69 per 100,000.
- When jail inmates are included in the incarceration rate, it reaches 762 per 100,000. When jail inmates are included for the black population, the rate reaches 4,618 per 100,000.
- More than 1 in 10 black males between the ages of 25 and 34 are currently held in state or federal prison or in local jails.
- Black males are 6 times more likely to be held in custody than white males. Hispanic males are slightly more than 2 times more likely than white males to be held in custody.
- Black males represented 35.4 percent of all inmates. Of these, 35.5 percent were between the ages of 20 and 29.
- Since midyear 2000, the incarceration rate for black women dropped from 6 times to 3.7 times that for white women. Over this period, the incarceration rate for black women dropped by 8.4 percent, but rose 51 percent for white women.
- Approximately one-third of all admissions to state prisons in 2006 were for violations of parole or conditions of supervised release, representing a 3.1 percent increase from 2005.
- Ninety-six percent of jail capacity was occupied.
- Nearly 6 in 10 offenders in local jails were racial or ethnic minorities. An estimated 301,900 were black and 125,600 were Hispanic.

The reports, *Prison Inmates at Midyear 2007* and *Jail Inmates at Midyear 2007*, are available at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub.

Other reports available from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (same website) provide additional information on prison populations:

- An estimated 44 percent of state inmates and 39 percent of federal inmates report that they have a current medical problem other than a cold or virus (*Medical Problems of Prisoners*).
- Between 2005 and 2006, the number of HIV-positive prisoners dropped 3.1 percent, despite a growth in the overall prison custody population of 2.2 percent during the same period (*HIV in Prisons, 2006*).

Economic Stimulus Checks Intercepted for Child Support

The federal government has intercepted \$459 million in stimulus payments and directed the funds to states to pay child support debt. For custodial parents and children who receive welfare, however, the intercepted funds will likely not reach them directly. Of the \$459 million in intercepted funds, \$166 million will be retained by states to repay the costs of welfare. The remaining \$292 million in intercepted funds will be directed by states to families who have never received welfare. See *\$842M in stimulus cash held back from debtors*, www.cnnmoney.com.