

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The role of noncustodial fathers in the lives of low-income families has received considerable attention from policymakers and programs in recent years. While child support enforcement efforts have increased dramatically in recent years, there is evidence that many low-income fathers cannot afford to support their children financially without impoverishing themselves or their families.

To address these complex issues, a number of initiatives have focused on developing services to help low-income fathers become more financially and emotionally involved with their families, and to help young low-income families become stable. One such initiative, sponsored by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Ford Foundation (and other foundation support) was the Partners for Fragile Families (PFF) demonstration. The PFF demonstration operated from 2000 to 2003 in 13 projects located in nine states. It focused on promoting the voluntary establishment of paternity; connecting young fathers with the child support system and encouraging the payment of child support; improving parenting and relationship skills of young fathers; helping young fathers secure and retain employment; and strengthening family ties, commitments, and other types of father involvement when parents do not live together.

This report presents ethnographic case studies of eight young (age 19–26), unmarried, low-income fathers who participated in PFF demonstration initiatives located in Boston and Indianapolis. It is part of a multi-component evaluation sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services evaluation of the PFF demonstration projects. The evaluation also includes an implementation study and an analysis of participant child support payment and employment outcomes.

All eight men (five black, two Hispanic, and one biracial) included in this study were reared in or close to poverty. Only three men grew up with the consistent presence of more than one parent at home, including stepparents. The other five men were raised largely by single parents or other relatives. Three men had one child, four had two children, and one had three children. Six of the eight men had a juvenile or adult criminal record. PFF staff in the Boston and Indianapolis study sites identified potential candidates for inclusion in the study and the ethnographer from the evaluation team then recruited participants from this pool.

This report relies heavily on the actual words of these young fathers to illustrate the key themes and findings that emerged. The opportunity to learn in greater depth about the experiences of the young men targeted by the PFF program through these case studies offers additional insight into the challenges facing young and economically disadvantaged fathers, and how services provided by the PFF demonstration projects may help these men approach fatherhood and family life in healthier ways.

The study addresses five broad research questions:

- How did the fathers view fatherhood, and what was the nature of their relationships with their children’s mothers and their children?

- What were the fathers' experiences with the PFF program, what did they value about the program, and what did they gain from their participation in it?
- What were the fathers' views and experiences with matters related to child support?
- What were the fathers' views on employment prospects and experiences with employment?
- What were the fathers' hopes and aspirations for the future?

The fieldwork was conducted between November 2003 and July 2004 and consisted of a series of interviews, observations, and interactions with these unmarried fathers, as well as discussions with their case managers, and, in some cases, with relatives and the mothers of their children.

Key Themes and Findings

Several key themes and findings emerged through the study's in-depth discussions with the young men. These are summarized below.

Perspectives on Fatherhood and Family Functioning

The men generally lacked a strong concept of the meaning of fatherhood. All the men reported that they had neither given much thought about fatherhood while growing up, nor did any of them expect to become young fathers. All were reared in environments where absentee fatherhood was common, so there was little to observe or comprehend about fatherhood in their community settings. When they learned that they would soon become fathers themselves, the men's central concern was whether and how their current level of material resources would allow them to function effectively in that role.

The first year of fatherhood was fraught with conflict with the mother of the child; a major source of tension stemmed from the father's lack of a steady income to contribute to their child's care, coupled with his unpredictable periods of withdrawal from the child's and/or the mother's life. Each man reported encountering problems with the mother of his children within the first year of his child's life. The men who fathered children with a second partner experienced conflicts almost immediately after they informed the mother of the first child about the second. Their conflicts with the mothers ranged from consistent verbal battles to violent interactions. Yet, the men involved with mothers of their second or third children were able to develop stronger commitments to these relationships as a result of their participation in the PFF program.

The men varied in the patterns and degree of access they had to their children, but all expressed the desire to be a consistent presence in their children's lives, hoping to spare them the inconsistent or absent fathering the young men had experienced. The men placed significant emphasis on the importance of providing both discipline and affection in their children's upbringing. They suggested that PFF had given them a greater appreciation of the need for patience with children, and of the complexity and challenges involved in good parenting. They also indicated that participation in the PFF program helped them cultivate more

complex views and ideas about fatherhood than they had before their involvement. For some, these views included reconsidering the traditional roles of father and mother, expressing greater acceptance of mothers as breadwinners and fathers as caretakers, and viewing parenting as a shared endeavor.

The most powerful new idea about fatherhood transmitted to the men through their participation in the PFF program was that fatherhood represented a continually transforming experience. The men found it enlightening and useful to think about fatherhood as a process that needed to be approached as an ongoing learning experience, rather than a discrete skill or task that could be mastered with finality at some specific point in time. The men believed that they acquired a richer understanding of the responsibilities, expectations, and challenges related to fatherhood and family life and, most important, a better sense of how they should approach them. For these men, the most significant idea was that fathers needed to be a visible presence in the lives of their children, irrespective of their ability to provide material support.

The men credited their participation in the PFF program with helping them learn to work toward resolving conflict better and exercising greater patience with their children's mothers. Most fathers experienced high-conflict relationships with the mothers of their first children, and only one man was engaged in an ongoing romantic relationship with the mother of his only child at the time fieldwork for this study was conducted. The men emphasized that they made efforts to improve their relationships because it was better for their children to be spared the conflict. The men also came to appreciate certain aspects of the mothers' parenting abilities. Improved cooperation between the parents appeared strongly linked to the men's capacity to provide both materially and nonmaterially for their children, supplying money, diapers, and clothes, but also caring for and playing with the children with some consistency. For the men involved with different mothers of their second or third children, participation in PFF appeared to help the men understand more about themselves and the kinds of potential partners that might be appropriate for them so they could make better choices for themselves for partnering and possible marriage in the future, and better handle issues of conflict with their current partners.

Perspectives on the PFF Program Experience

The men typically viewed the system (e.g., courts, child support agencies, and other public agencies) as serving the inherent interest of the mothers of their children but came to view the PFF program, and its hosting agency more generally, as a distinct resource and ally. The men initially sought the services of the PFF programs either because they were mandated (by the court or under the terms of their parole or probation) or because friends or relatives suggested they do so. The degree to which agency staff were caring, knowledgeable, and eager to provide support impressed the men, and their desire to remain involved in the program was almost always based on having achieved rapport with program staff. The men's desire to commit to the program stemmed from their feeling that program staff cared about them in ways that extended far beyond the standard client-service provider relationships.

The most important feature of the PFF program for these men was the creation of a safe space to share concerns, points of confusion, and curiosities about fatherhood in the company of young men who also wanted to confront these matters. For each man, successful participation in the PFF program was also linked to the program staff's capacity to provide other services, formally or informally. These included job search, training, and placement, educational

enrichment opportunities (usually in the form of GED program), as well as fatherhood training. Thus, the men's positive views regarding the PFF program was associated with having access to a range of services and benefits that extended beyond fatherhood training, but that allowed each man to better himself along several dimensions linked to improving his capacity to function effectively as a father.

Perspectives on Child Support

None of the men experienced significant difficulty meeting the expectations of their children's mothers for financial support; all felt strongly that their capacity and willingness to provide financial support for their children should legitimate their right to have consistent access or even joint custody. Those with formal arrangements said they were timely in their payments but also relied on family members to help make child support payments when unable to do so themselves. The men also recognized that the mothers of their children to whom child support was owed were most satisfied with the consistency of formal child support orders. The men without formal child support arrangements said they provided whatever was needed, when it was needed; those with child support orders said they provided additional material and financial support in response to specific needs as they arose. Five of the eight men had formal child support orders with weekly payment obligations ranging from \$40 to \$90 for each child. The other three men, including one who had joint custody, provided child support informally. Of those who had formal support orders, PFF staff worked with the fathers to help them understand and navigate the child support system and work through various issues related to establishing paternity and child support obligations.

Perspectives on Employment

The men viewed obtaining and maintaining stable employment as essential to attaining a happier life for themselves and their children, but their employment histories were uniformly marked by unemployment spells (both short and long) and low-wage jobs. As a group, the men linked the image of successful fatherhood with self-sufficiency. They believed that improving their employment prospects would allow them to feel better about themselves, improve their capacity to be good fathers, and help establish healthier parenting relationships between the men and the mothers of their children, especially because it meant that they could provide materially as well as emotionally to the growth and development of their children.

The men who had found and maintained work (and those who had improved their residential arrangements) expressed more positive feelings about their capacity to successfully function as fathers in the future than those who had less successful experiences with employment. The fathers with more positive employment patterns appeared more aware of the obstacles and challenges standing in their way, or clearer about the additional steps they had to take to continue improving their personal and parental situations. The two men who remained unemployed tended to remain focused on getting their personal lives in better order so they could begin planning more ambitious future goals for themselves and their children. All the men emphasized that their interest in and subsequent commitment to participating in the PFF program was due in large part to the staff's willingness to help them with their education and employment goals.

Hopes and Aspirations for the Future

The men hoped and aspired to achieve basic family-centered goals: they wanted to be married and living with their children, they wanted secure and stable jobs that would provide resources to ensure their children's education, and they wanted reduced family tension and greater stability in their lives. The men also spoke of the desire for some sense of inner peace grounded in the belief that they were living their lives appropriately and responsibly. In all but one case, however, they did not envision marrying the mother of their first child, though three men indicated optimism about their relationship with the mother of their second child.

The men wanted a better life for their children but also worried whether their hopes would be realized. All the men expressed hope that their children would live in a safe community, attain an education, and be happy and well prepared for successful adult lives. This hope was tempered by the awareness that their children might face some of the same hurdles and temptations they had succumbed to. Nonetheless, the men expressed the strong desire that their children would not "have to grow up the way I grew up" and would "do a lot better than what I did." Consistent themes in discussions regarding future hopes and aspirations were that their children would acquire as much education as possible, and that the fathers would be a stable, visible, and responsible presence in their lives.

The case studies presented here highlight that there is a need for young, low-income, unmarried fathers to acquire a stronger and broader understanding of fatherhood and positive family functioning; that they face significant and complex challenges in this regard; and that the men in this study exhibited notable positive growth and development in their capacity to function as fathers. While it is unclear that any of these men will ever find themselves in an ideal family setting, it is clear that their participation in the PFF program helped them be better prepared to deal with life-course transitions and circumstances. In keeping with the intent of the PFF programs, these men also appeared to have developed a deeper and richer understanding of the many aspects of fatherhood, and to have become more financially and emotionally involved with their children.
