

HEALTHY MARRIAGE AND RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Overview

The Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) program is part of ACF's strategy to improve the long-term well-being of children and families. ACF's [Office of Family Assistance](#) funds grants for the purpose of carrying out healthy marriage promotion activities and activities promoting responsible fatherhood. Healthy marriage promotion activities include:

- Public advertising campaigns on the value of marriage and the skills needed to increase marital stability and health
- Education in high schools on the value of marriage, relationship skills, and budgeting
- Marriage education, marriage skills, and relationship skills programs that may include parenting skills, financial management, conflict resolution, and job and career advancement
- Pre-marital education and marriage skills training for engaged couples and for couples or individuals interested in marriage
- Marriage enhancement and marriage skills training programs for married couples
- Divorce reduction programs that teach relationship skills
- Marriage mentoring programs that use married couples as role models and mentors in communities that are at risk
- Programs to reduce the disincentives to marriage in means-tested aid programs

Activities promoting responsible fatherhood include:

- Activities to promote marriage or sustain marriage
- Activities to promote responsible parenting
- Activities to foster economic stability

HMRF is a \$150 million discretionary grant program originally authorized under the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 and reauthorized under the Claims Resolution Act of 2010. ACF supports a number of research and evaluation activities as well as learning from a broad array of other activities such as performance management, technical assistance, stakeholder engagement, site monitoring, and continuous quality improvement.

ACF's Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) performance measures related to Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood:

(For adult-serving programs)
Increase the proportion of participants who, at program exit, express positive attitudes towards marriage - *Performance Measure 22F* ([p. 361](#))

(For adult-serving programs)
Increase the proportion of married couples who, at program exit, view their marriage as lifelong - *Performance Measure 22G* ([p. 362](#))

(For youth-serving programs)
Increase the proportion of youth who express attitudes supporting of the success sequence - *Performance Measure 22H* ([p. 362](#))



Past Research and Evaluation

Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE)

A large body of research has shown that, on average, children raised in stable, two-parent families have better outcomes on a range of measures, even into adulthood.^{25,26,27,28} Research has also identified dimensions of couples' relationship functioning (e.g., positive communication, effective conflict management, problem solving, etc.) that could be modified or enhanced through relationship- focused educational programming.²⁹ Some evaluations have found that such programming can produce improvement in multiple dimensions of relationship quality and reductions in break-up or divorce.^{30,31} While early research focused primarily on middle-class, white couples who were engaged or married³², ACF has supported research on healthy marriage and relationship education for more diverse populations. Past ACF research includes the completion of three large scale randomized controlled trials of healthy marriage and relationship education programs (the [Supporting Healthy Marriages](#), [Building Strong Families](#), and [Parents and Children Together](#) evaluations) and one quasi-experimental trial of healthy marriage community initiatives (the [Community Healthy Marriages Initiatives](#) evaluation).

Responsible Fatherhood (RF)

In recent decades, efforts to support and promote responsible fatherhood have been spurred by research that shows a link between supportive fathering and positive child outcomes.^{33,34,35} Responsible fatherhood programs aim to provide resources and supports to fathers around healthy marriage and relationships, parenting, and economic stability. Much of the early research in the area of fatherhood had focused on fathers with middle-income or who were divorced. The

²⁵ Waldfogel, J., Craigie, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2010). Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing. *Future Child*, 20(2), 87-112.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ901824.pdf>

²⁶ Lee, D., & McLanahan, S. (2015). Family structure transitions and child development: instability, selection, and population heterogeneity. *American Sociological Review*, 80(4), 738-763. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0003122415592129>

²⁷ Wu, L., & Martinson, B. (1993). Family structure and the risk of premarital birth. *American Sociological Review*, 58(2), 210-232. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2095967>

²⁸ Biglan, A., Flay B. R., Embry, D. D., & Sandler, I. N. (2012). The Critical Role of Nurturing Environments for Promoting Human Well-Being. *American Psychologist*, 67(4), 257-271. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026796>

²⁹ Blanchard, V. L., et al. (2009). Investigating the Effects of Marriage and Relationship Education on Couples' Communication Skills: A Meta-Analytic Study. *Journal of Family Psychology* 23(2), 203-214. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0015211>

³⁰ Hawkins, A. J., et al. (2008). Does Marriage and Relationship Education Work? A Meta-Analytic Study. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 76(5), 723-734. <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2008-13625-002.pdf>

³¹ Moore, Q., Avellar, S., Patnaik, A., Covington, R., & Wu, A. (2018). Parents and Children Together: Effects of Two Healthy Marriage Programs for Low-Income Couples (OPRE Report #2018-58). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/parents-and-children-together-effects-of-two-healthy-marriage-programs-for-low-income-couples>

³² Johnson, M. D. (2012). Healthy marriage initiatives: On the need for empiricism in policy implementation. *American Psychologist*, 67(4), 296-308. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0027743>

³³ Adamsons, K. & Johnson, S. K. (2013). An Updated and Expanded Meta-Analysis of Nonresident Fathering and Child Well-Being. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 27(4), 589-599. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/a0033786>

³⁴ Cabrera, N.J., Shannon, J. D., & Tamis-LeMonda, C. (2007). Fathers' Influence on their Children's Cognitive and Emotional Development: From Toddlers to Pre-K. *Applied Developmental Science*, 11, 208-213. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888690701762100>

³⁵ Yoder, J.R., Brisson, D., & Lopez, A. (2016). Moving Beyond Fatherhood Involvement: The Association Between Father-Child Relationship Quality and Youth Delinquency Trajectories. *Family Relations*, 65(3), 462-476. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12197>



field of research on responsible fatherhood with men with low incomes or who have never married is growing. Though the field can draw from some of the past research, the unique circumstances of men with low-income, particularly fathers who do not reside with their children, necessitate a distinct line of inquiry. ACF has completed one large scale randomized controlled trial of responsible fatherhood programs as part of the Parents and Children Together evaluation.

Research and Evaluation Stakeholders

In setting HMRF research and evaluation priorities, ACF takes into account legislative requirements and Congressional interests; the interest and needs of ACF, HHS, and Administration leadership; program office staff and leadership; ACF partners; the populations served; researchers; and other stakeholders. ACF routinely interacts with these stakeholders through a variety of engagement activities. These activities inform our ongoing research and evaluation planning processes.

Who

- State, territory, tribal, local, and non-profit HMRF administrators and staff
- HMRF training and technical assistance providers
- HMRF curriculum or model developers
- Populations served by HMRF programs, including adult couples, adult individuals, youth of high school age, fathers involved in the justice system, and fathers in communities
- Federal partners in HHS and other agencies, such as the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the National Institutes of Justice at the Department of Justice (DOJ/NIJ), and the Department of Labor (DOL)
- Researchers and policy experts
- National organizations, resource centers, and clearinghouses, such as the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriages and Families and the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse
- Partners in the fields of child welfare, child support and enforcement, domestic violence prevention and intervention, and the criminal justice system

How

- Conferences and meetings, such as the National Fatherhood Summit and other national conferences that include an emphasis on HMRF programs, such as the Research and Evaluation Conference on Self-Sufficiency (RECS)
- HMRF Grantee Conference
- Engagement with HMRF training and technical assistance networks
- Surveys, focus groups, interviews, and other activities conducted as part of research and evaluation studies
- Structured mechanisms for broad stakeholder engagement, such as the [Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation \(FRAMING\) Research Project](#), which is working to understand how stakeholders make use of existing research, and is identifying gaps in the knowledge base related to HMRF programs



Examples of Broad Questions

1. Who do HMRF programs serve and how are HMRF programs implemented?
2. How can HMRF programs use data and evidence to strengthen their program implementation in order to improve outcomes?
3. How can HMRF programs better serve specific sub-populations, including:
 - a. Youth and young adults
 - b. Non-resident fathers
 - c. Fathers involved with the justice system
 - d. Adults participating in healthy marriage programs as individuals
 - e. Adults and youth experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) or teen dating violence?
 - f. Families in rural contexts
4. How do HMRF programs affect marriage/relationship, parenting, and economic stability outcomes for program participants and how can these effects be measured?
5. How do HMRF programs affect the well-being of program participant's children and how can these effects be measured?
6. What strategies are most effective for recruiting, engaging, and retaining participants in HMRF programs?



Examples of Recent and Ongoing Research and Evaluation Activities

| | Broad Question | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|----|----|
| | #1 | #2 | #3a | #3b | #3c | #3d | #3e | #3f | #4 | #5 | #6 |
| Building Bridges and Bonds (B3) Evaluation | X | X | | X | X | | | | X | X | X |
| Coparenting and Healthy Relationship And Marriage Education for Dads (CHaRMED) | X | | | X | | | | | | | |
| Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives: A Continuous Quality Improvement Approach in the Child Welfare System | | | | X | | | | | | | |
| Fatherhood and Marriage Local Evaluation and Cross-Site (FaMLE Cross-Site) | X | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) | | | | | | | | | | X | |
| HMRP Compliance Assessment and Performance (CAPstone) Grantee Review | | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts | | | | | | | | X | | | |
| Parents and Children Together (PACT) | | X | | | X | | | | X | | |
| Preventing and Addressing Intimate Violence when Engaging Dads (PAIVED) | X | | | | | | X | | | | |
| Responding to Intimate Violence in Relationship Programs (RIViR) | X | | | | | | X | | | | |
| Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SARHM) | | | X | | | | | | | | |
| Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS) | X | X | X | | | X | | | X | X | X |
| Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR) | | X | | | | | | | | | X |
| Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF) | | X | | | | | | | | | X |

- **Building Bridges and Bonds (B3) Evaluation**: is a rigorous evaluation that includes six fatherhood programs. B3 is designed to test innovative, evidence-informed programming for fathers, with the goal of building practical evidence that can be used to improve services. (#1) (#2) (#3b) (#3c) (#4) (#5) (#6)
- **Coparenting and Healthy Relationship And Marriage Education for Dads (CHaRMED)**: is an evaluation to use existing data, focus groups with fathers, and semi-structured interviews with RF program staff partners, curriculum developers, and fathers to better understand how RF programs support healthy marriages/relationships and coparenting and inform the RF field about potential future directions in HMRE and coparenting programming. (#1) (#3b)



- [Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives: A Continuous Quality Improvement Approach in the Child Welfare System](#): is a study of the use of a collaborative continuous quality improvement approach to identify, implement, and test strategies and interventions to engage fathers and paternal relatives of children involved in the child welfare system. (#3b)
- [Fatherhood and Marriage Local Evaluation and Cross-Site \(FaMLE Cross-Site\)](#): is a project to support HMRF grantees through fostering high-quality data collection, strengthening grantee-led local evaluations, and conducting cross-site performance measures analysis. (#1) FaMLE Cross-Site supports HMRF grantees and cross-grantee learning through:
 - **Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management (nFORM) development, maintenance, and use:** nFORM is a program-specific management information system that HMRF grantees and ACF staff use to collect, track, and report data on HMRF program performance metrics. (#2)
 - **Local evaluation technical assistance:** providing technical assistance to HMRF grantees and independent evaluators to conduct grantee-specific evaluations that answer questions most relevant to the program. (#2)
 - **Continuous quality improvement technical assistance:** providing technical assistance to HMRF grantees to use their nFORM data to identify, describe, and analyze strengths and problems, then test, implement, learn from, and revise solutions. (#2)
 - **Analysis and dissemination of cross-grantee data:** to help researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, and other stakeholders understand program services, participants, and implementation. (#2)
- [Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research \(FRAMING Research\)](#): is a project to summarize gaps in current knowledge and existing approaches in HMRF programs, synthesize implications for HMRF learning, and describe implications of associated topics and areas for HMRF (e.g., adult learning, implementation science, employment services, substance use and mental health services, etc.) (#5)
- **HMRF Compliance Assessment and Performance (CAPstone) Grantee Review:** is a process by which federal staff and technical assistance providers collaboratively review nFORM data and other grantee documents summarizing grant activities to assess grantee progress toward and achievement in meeting programmatic, data, evaluation, and implementation goals. The results of the CAPstone process guide federal directives and future technical assistance. (#2)
- [Human Services Programs in Rural Contexts](#): is a study to provide a rich description of current and past human services programs in rural contexts; determine the unmet need for human services in those communities; and identify opportunities for strengthening the capacity of human services to promote the economic and social well-being of individuals, families, and communities in rural contexts (#3f)
- [Parents and Children Together \(PACT\) Evaluation](#): was a multiple-component evaluation to assess both implementation processes and measurable impacts of responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage relationship education programs. (#4)



- **Parents and Children Together (PACT) Pathways to Outcomes substudy:** a substudy to visually depict evidence-informed hypotheses about how RF and HM program activities may contribute to intended outcomes, using results from rigorous evaluations, discussions with researchers and practitioners, and a targeted literature search. (#2)
- **Trauma-Informed Approaches for Serving Justice-Involved Parents substudy:** a PACT substudy to understand how RF grantees serving incarcerated and recently released fathers incorporate a trauma-informed approach into their services, and how grantees can strengthen this perspective in their programming. (#3c)
- **Preventing and Addressing Intimate Violence when Engaging Dads (PAIVED):** is a study that aims to outline approaches that RF programs could take to address and contribute to the prevention of IPV among fathers using information gathered from RF grantee fatherhood programs, relevant curricula and discussion with curriculum developers, and interviews and program observations with RF program and partner organization staff. (#1) (#3e)
- **Responding to Intimate Violence in Relationship Programs (RIViR):** is a study to examine how IPV and teen dating violence assessment tools and approaches work for identifying HMRE program participants who are experiencing violence so that they can be referred for further assessment and services (#1) (#3e)
- **Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SARHM):** is a study to use a self-regulation framework and formative rapid-cycle approaches to increase the impact of HMRE programs for youth by identifying, developing, and evaluating co-regulation focused training resources for staff who implement youth HMRE programs. (#3a)
- **Strengthening Relationship Education and Marriage Services (STREAMS):** is a large multi-site random assignment impact and process evaluation of HMRE programs serving adults and youth, designed to answer multiple practice-relevant questions regarding the effectiveness of specific programming and curricula. STREAMS will emphasize program improvement and answering questions of particular policy relevance, with a focus on outcomes for adult individuals, adult couples, and youth populations served by HMRE programs at five sites across the country. (#1) (#2) (#3d) (#4) (#5) (#6)
 - **STREAMS youth substudy:** a substudy to use rapid learning approaches to identify and test facilitator training and coaching strategies for HMRE facilitators of programs for youth. (#3a)
- **Strengthening the Implementation of Marriage and Relationship Programs (SIMR):** is a multi-site study that aims to 1) identify and test promising practices for addressing critical implementation challenges in healthy marriage and relationship education programs using a rapid learning approach and 2) support grantee-led local evaluations. (#2) (#6)
- **Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF):** is a multi-site study that aims to 1) identify and test promising practices for addressing critical implementation challenges in responsible fatherhood programs using a rapid learning approach and 2) support grantee-led local evaluations. (#2) (#6)



Future Directions for Research and Evaluation

The broad questions listed above will continue to drive much of ACF's research and evaluation activity in this area, including engagement with the three new HMRF grant programs that ACF has forecast for FY21: Adult HMRE programs; Adult Responsible Fatherhood programs; and HMRE, parenting, and job and career advancement programs for youth. Future activities will also be informed by emerging findings from ongoing research and evaluation activities, other learning activities, and continued engagement with HMRF stakeholders.

For this portfolio, the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project—which is working to summarize gaps in current knowledge and existing approaches in HMRF programs, synthesize implications for HMRF learning, and describe implications of associated topics and areas for HMRF—will be particularly useful for guiding future directions for research and evaluation activities.

Examples of activities planned for the next few years include:

- Collecting and analyzing longer-term follow up data from adult individuals and youth participating in HMRE programs
- Conducting rapid cycle tests of implementation approaches in HMRE and RF programs
- Conducting case studies and interviews to provide a rich description of human services programs (including HMRE and RF) in rural contexts
- Conducting a case study of an HMRE program's transition from in-person workshop sessions to all virtual content due to the COVID-19 pandemic

