



Serving Young Fathers in Responsible Fatherhood Programs

White Paper for the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) Project

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**Serving Young Fathers in Responsible
Fatherhood Programs: White Paper for the
Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage –
Illuminating the Next Generation of Research
(FRAMING Research) Project**

September 2023

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Overview

This white paper explores common challenges and strategies that Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs face in recruiting and engaging young fathers (that is, fathers under age 30) in their services. Although RF programs can serve fathers of any age, relatively few young fathers participate in these programs. However, young fathers are uniquely situated to benefit RF programs, which provide services to support parenting, healthy relationships, and economic stability. Young fathers may be more likely to benefit in each of these areas than older fathers as they are typically in regular contact with their children and their children's mother, but have limited parenting experience, making the parenting and relationship supports particularly helpful (Robbers, 2009). Young fathers also may not be as financially secure as older fathers, and therefore may be more likely to benefit from employment services (Smeeding et al., 2011).

Following an introduction (Section I), the paper next compares demographic characteristics, attitudes going into the program, workshop participation, and service receipt of fathers enrolled in federally funded RF programs across three age groups: 18-24, 25-29, and 30 or older (Section II). Overall, we found that both groups of young fathers differed from older fathers in a few key areas. Young fathers were more racially and ethnically diverse than older fathers—that is, more likely to identify as Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino. They were more likely to be in relationships and live with their child than older fathers. Young fathers were also more likely to be employed or looking for work and less likely than older fathers to have a high school diploma or GED or to have health care. They also were slightly less likely to participate in RF services compared with older fathers, a challenge frequently noted in the literature.

The paper next describes common challenges that RF programs face when recruiting and engaging young fathers into their programs (Section III). We draw on information identified through a comprehensive literature review as well as focus groups and interview data collected from two RF program staff that currently serve a large proportion of young fathers.

Recruitment challenges include:

- Young fathers can be difficult to locate through traditional community partners
- Young fathers often mistrust services, perhaps due to negative experiences with other organizations or systems
- Young fathers might doubt that they will benefit from RF services

Engagement challenges include:

- Young fathers tend to have urgent needs and often are juggling competing priorities
- Many young fathers are grappling with their identities, as men and as fathers, and they are unsure about their future career paths
- Young fathers might not be mentally or emotionally ready to participate in a fatherhood program
- Some topics covered in workshops might be less relevant to young fathers
- Young fathers might be particularly hesitant to open up during workshop sessions because of peer norms and prior experiences in “classroom” settings

We also summarize the strategies that programs have used to overcome these common challenges.

Recruitment strategies include:

- Embed program staff in the community and recruit from places that young people frequent
- Use a range of recruitment sources and communication methods
- Engage past participants or program ambassadors in the recruitment process
- Tailor the recruitment message to appeal to what young fathers need most, but do not overpromise what the program can offer.

Engagement strategies include:

- Create a comfortable, inviting program culture that encourages young fathers' contributions regardless of their stage in life
- Encourage fathers to keep notes so they can reference information in the future when it becomes more relevant
- Enlist older men in the groups to act as mentors
- Modify existing services to accommodate young fathers.

In the final section of the paper (Section IV), we provide a summary of our findings across the quantitative and qualitative data that we analyzed and a discussion of future research opportunities. Many young fathers come to the program with previous negative experiences with broader systems, such as criminal justice or child support. These fathers are quick to distrust the programs' offers and might be reluctant to participate in services. Further, young fathers participating in RF programs are juggling multiple commitments to family, employers, and community. Despite these commonalities, the challenges young fathers face might be more acute and the solutions more nuanced. For example, programs might have to invest even more resources in recruitment to work with a wider range of partners, especially those that already engage young fathers; take time to establish their staff's presence in the community to build trust; and use many approaches to connect to young fathers, such as texting or social media. Overall, the literature we reviewed and the data we collected support the conclusion that involving young fathers in RF services is an opportunity to provide young fathers with the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive. The young fathers we spoke with highlighted the benefits they received from their participation in the program and believed that other young fathers would similarly benefit. The findings presented in this white paper help fill a gap in the literature on how to serve young fathers as literature to date has been limited on their specific characteristics and needs. Obtaining a better understanding of young fathers and how to address their needs can enable programs to reach more young fathers and help them achieve their personal and parenting goals.

I. Introduction

Young fathers are uniquely situated to benefit from Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs, which provide services to support parenting, healthy relationships, and economic stability. Young fathers—defined in this paper as younger than 30—are more likely than older fathers to be in regular contact with their children and their children’s mother, giving them more opportunities to use the parenting and co-parenting skills taught in RF programs (Robbers, 2009). Young fathers might also have limited parenting experience, making parenting supports particularly helpful. Moreover, young fathers might not be as financially secure as older fathers, and thus may be more likely to benefit from the job training and employment services offered through RF programs (Smeeding et al., 2011).

Although RF programs can serve fathers of any age, relatively few young fathers participate in these programs. For example, only 13 percent of fathers who enrolled in federally funded RF programs between 2015 and 2020 were younger than 25 (Avellar et al., 2021). Program providers and researchers note how difficult it can be to recruit young fathers and retain them in their programs (Hennigar & Alamillo, 2023).

About Responsible Fatherhood programs

Since 2005, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration of Children and Families (ACF) has provided discretionary grants to state, local, and tribal agencies to deliver Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programming. In 2020, OFA provided funding to the most recent cohort of grant recipients comprised of 58 RF programs. The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, also within ACF, works with OFA to conduct research on how best to serve families through these grants.

RF programs provide group-based workshops for fathers and father-figures whose children are as old as 24. These services are designed to help fathers build skills for effective and nurturing parenting, support family formation and healthy relationships, and improve economic outcomes for fathers and their families. Fathers participate in at least 24 hours of group-based workshops, which are often accompanied by individualized case management, employment or financial planning services, and referrals to other related services. ▲

Given that young fathers potentially have much to gain from RF services, we sought to answer three research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of young fathers currently enrolled in RF programs and how do these characteristics compare with those of older fathers?
2. What common challenges do programs face in identifying, enrolling, and serving young fathers?
3. How have programs addressed these challenges?

To answer these research questions, we used a mixed-methods approach. First, we conducted a descriptive analysis of survey and performance measures data from the 2020 cohort of RF grant recipients to compare young and older fathers’ demographic characteristics, baseline attitudes about parenting, relationship characteristics, economic stability, and service receipt. We also conducted a literature review of the past 20 years of research on recruiting and serving young fathers in RF and similar programs (such as, employment, parenting, and adolescent pregnancy prevention programs). Finally, we conducted an in-depth qualitative study with two current RF grant recipients who serve a higher percentage of young fathers compared with other grant recipients.

We begin the paper with a profile of the young fathers who have been served by the 2020 cohort of RF grant recipients thus far, documenting their demographic characteristics, attitudes going into the program, workshop participation, and service receipt (Section II). We also compare young fathers' characteristics with those of older fathers. We then describe the common challenges RF programs face in recruiting and engaging young fathers, as well as strategies the programs have used to overcome these challenges (Section III). We conclude with a summary and discussion of future directions (Section IV).

Key terms

- **Recruiting:** Identifying and enrolling eligible and interested participants into a program
- **Engaging:** Maintaining participants' consistent involvement in services until they complete the program
- **Workshop:** A service provided in RF programs whereby one or more facilitators lead a group of fathers, often using a standardized curriculum
- **2015 cohort:** The third cohort of RF grant recipients that OFA funded with five-year grants awarded in October 2015
- **2020 cohort:** The fourth, and current, cohort of RF grant recipients OFA funded with five-year grants awarded in October 2020
- **nFORM** (Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management): A data system recipients of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grants use to collect, analyze, and report performance measure data

II. A profile of young fathers served by the 2020 cohort of RF grant recipients

We conducted a descriptive analysis of client characteristics and program participation among young and older fathers served by 58 RF programs. We used both survey and service data from the Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management (nFORM) system. For participant survey data, we drew on the applicant characteristics survey (ACS) and entrance survey, which fathers complete at the time of program enrollment and the first workshop they attend. For service data, we used information that grant recipients enter into nFORM about the types of services fathers engage in as well as participation, such as attendance at workshop sessions.

We first created three age-group categories: (1) 18–24; (2) 25–29; (3) 30 and older. Age served was the independent variable in our analysis. Although we use a broad definition of young fathers in this paper (younger than 30), we separated the young fathers into two age groups to get a more nuanced look into how similar these fathers are to each other. For example, a father in his late twenties has likely had more time to establish himself financially compared with a father still in his teens or early twenties. Structuring our analysis in this way enabled us to test whether these two groups were statistically different from each other on the selected characteristics, which might help programs tailor their approaches to serving each group of young fathers.

Next, we constructed a series of dependent variables from the ACS and entrance surveys along with service participation variables. Appendix A includes a full list of the variables with brief descriptions. We then used a multivariate analysis of variance to test for statistically significant differences between the age

groups on client characteristics and participation (Exhibits 1-4 note significant differences between age groups). Our final analytic sample size was 11,443 fathers.

A. Summary of key findings

Young and older fathers had similar demographic characteristics, with a few statistically significant, albeit small, differences (Exhibit 1). For example, young fathers (both 18–24 and 25–29) were slightly more likely to be Black or African American compared with fathers older than 30. They also were more likely to be Hispanic and speak Spanish as their primary language at home, particularly fathers in the 18–24 age group. Both groups of young fathers were less likely to have a high school degree or GED compared with fathers older than 30. Notably, young fathers might still be continuing their education, so it is possible that this difference might shrink or even disappear as they age.

Exhibit 1. Fathers' demographic characteristics, by age group

Characteristic	18–24	25–29	30 or older
Race (%)			
American Indian or Alaska Native	4.4	4.4	4.7
Asian	0.6 ^a	0.9 ^b	1.6 ^{a,b}
Black or African American	52.0 ^a	52.2 ^b	47.8 ^{a,b}
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	3.0 ^{a,b}	1.7 ^b	1.7 ^a
White	31.7 ^{a,b}	34.4 ^b	33.4 ^a
Another race	13.5 ^{a,b}	12.0 ^b	14.0 ^a
Hispanic or Latino (%)	24.0 ^a	21.1	20.4 ^a
Primary language spoken at home (%)			
English	84.6 ^a	89.1 ^{a,b}	85.1 ^b
Spanish	12.0	9.5 ^b	11.5 ^b
Has a high school degree (%)	69.4 ^{a,b}	78.2 ^{a,b}	82.9 ^{a,b}
Total sample size	820	1,737	8,886

Source: nFORM.

^a Within a row, common superscript indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between 18-24-year-olds and another age group;

^b Within a row, common superscript indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between 25-29-year-olds and another age group.

Contrary to the literature, fathers who were 30 or older were more likely to be unemployed and report no income in the last 30 days than younger fathers. Older fathers also report higher rates of receiving public assistance compared with both groups of young fathers. Fathers in the 18–24 age group reported fewer job challenges—such as having a criminal record or not having reliable transportation. However, all fathers reported a desire to obtain more job skills. Both groups of young fathers were less likely than older fathers to have health insurance; only about half of fathers in the 18–24 age group reported having insurance.

Exhibit 2. Fathers' employment and income characteristics, by age group

Characteristic	18–24	25–29	30 or older
Employment status (%)			
Full time (35 hours or more)	37.1 ^a	42.6 ^{a,b}	37.2 ^b
Part time (1 to 34 hours)	9.6 ^a	8.1	7.4 ^a
Employed, but hours change weekly	4.1	4.2	4.2
Seasonal or temporary worker	5.2	4.4	4.8
Seasonal or temporary worker	2.4	1.8	1.7
Unemployed	43.7	41.6 ^b	46.4 ^b
Currently looking for work (%)	35.9 ^a	33.4 ^b	30.1 ^{a,b}
Income (%)			
No income in the last 30 days	34.9	34.0 ^b	37.9 ^b
Less than \$1,000	29.4 ^{a,b}	23.4 ^{a,b}	20.8 ^{a,b}
\$1,000–\$2,000	18.7 ^a	18.2 ^b	15.6 ^{a,b}
\$2,001–\$3,000	11.2 ^a	13.9 ^b	12.0 ^{a,b}
\$3,001–\$4,000 or greater	5.9 ^a	10.5 ^{a,b}	13.6 ^{a,b}
Receipt of any government assistance (%)	44.1	42.8 ^b	46.7 ^b
Difficulty paying bills (range = 1–4; higher scores indicate greater difficulty)	2.23	2.37	2.38
Has health insurance (%)	52.6 ^{a,b}	58.5 ^{a,b}	65.8 ^{a,b}
Job challenges (range = 0–8; higher scores indicate more job challenges)	1.0 ^a	2.0 ^a	2.0 ^a
Desire to obtain more job skills (range = 1–5; higher scores indicate greater desire)	3.0	3.0	3.0
Total sample size	820	1,737	8,886

Source: nFORM.

^a Within a row, common superscript indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between 18-24-year-olds and another age group;^b Within a row, common superscript indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between 25-29-year-olds and another age group.

Young and older fathers showed several differences in relationship and parenting characteristics (Exhibit 3). Compared with both groups of young fathers, fathers who were 30 or older were least likely to be in a romantic relationship. Fathers in the 18–24 age group reported the highest rates of committed and steady relationships and living with their partner. Young and older fathers who were in a relationship, reported similar levels of satisfaction. Young fathers were more likely than older fathers to be living with their youngest child. But, young fathers who did not live with their child were more likely than older fathers to report never seeing their child. Young fathers reported higher levels of satisfaction with their co-parenting relationship.

Exhibit 3. Fathers' relationship and parenting characteristics, by age group

Characteristic	18–24	25–29	30 years or older
Relationship status (%)			
Not in a romantic relationship	15.5 ^{a,b}	20.8 ^{a,b}	29.7 ^{a,b}
In an unsteady relationship	41.3 ^{a,b}	47.6 ^{a,b}	45.9 ^a
In a steady relationship	33.4 ^{a,b}	24.1 ^{a,b}	18.0 ^{a,b}
Married or engaged	9.8 ^a	7.6	6.4 ^a
Lives with current partner (%)	39.8 ^{a,b}	35.6 ^{a,b}	38.0
Satisfaction with romantic relationship (if applicable) (%)			
Not at all satisfied	2.8	4.0	4.9
Somewhat satisfied	15.2	15.5	16.6
Very satisfied	42.8	35.3	34.0
Co-parenting relationship satisfaction (range = 1–5; greater scores indicate more satisfaction)	4.0 ^a	4.0 ^b	3.0 ^{a,b}
Expecting a child (%)	10.9 ^{a,b}	7.5 ^{a,b}	3.6 ^{a,b}
Number of children	1 ^a	2 ^a	2 ^a
Lives with youngest child (%)	49.9 ^{a,b}	42.2 ^{a,b}	42.9 ^a
Frequency of seeing child for nonresident fathers (%)			
In the past week	2.8 ^a	1.0 ^a	1.1 ^a
In the past month	0.9 ^{a,b}	2.8 ^{a,b}	7.6 ^{a,b}
In the past six months	2.4 ^{a,b}	3.4 ^b	4.0 ^a
In the past year	2.3 ^{a,b}	3.7 ^{a,b}	4.2 ^a
One or two years ago	7.2 ^{a,b}	12.0 ^{a,b}	9.6
More than two years ago	10.9	10.9	9.8
Never	73.5 ^{a,b}	66.3 ^{a,b}	63.7 ^{a,b}
Total sample size	820	1,737	8,886

Source: nFORM.

^a Within a row, common superscript indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between 18-24-year-olds and another age group;

^b Within a row, common superscript indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between 25-29-year-olds and another age group.

Fathers reported how they heard about the RF program and their primary reason for enrolling (Exhibit 4). Among all fathers, the most commonly reported way of learning about the program was word of mouth, with nearly 40 percent of fathers in the 18-24 age group learning about the program this way. Fathers in the 18–24 age group were also the most likely to hear about the program through a government agency. Most fathers enrolled in the program want to learn about being a better parent and to improve their relationships. Although not a common reason for any age group, fathers in the 18–24 age group were the most likely to be enrolled in the program because of a court order.

Participation in services was similar across age groups, although slightly lower for the youngest fathers. For example, the youngest fathers (18–24) attended one fewer workshop session, on average, than fathers 25 or older. They also attended fewer workshop hours. Both groups of young fathers received less money in program incentives compared with older fathers. However, we cannot distinguish whether these service differences are because of fathers' behaviors, the characteristics of the programs they attended, or a combination of those factors.

Exhibit 4. Fathers' program enrollment and participation, by age group

Characteristic	18–24	25–29	30 or older
How they heard about the Responsible Fatherhood program (%)			
Government agency	21.2 ^a	20.3	18.3 ^a
Community organization	9.4	8.4 ^b	11.5 ^b
Program offered in prison or criminal justice facility	6.5	6.8	6.7
Program staff in the community or at an event	11.0	11.2	12.1
Word of mouth	39.8 ^a	37.5 ^b	34.2 ^{a,b}
Most common primary reasons for enrolling (%)			
To learn about being a better parent	74.3	77.5	75.8
To learn how to improve relationships	54.6 ^{a,b}	60.4 ^{a,b}	54.4 ^a
To find a job or better job	42.0 ^a	40.4 ^b	35.8 ^{a,b}
To meet school requirement	6.2 ^a	5.5 ^b	3.6 ^{a,b}
A court order	11.5 ^a	10.5 ^b	6.9 ^{a,b}
Average number of workshop hours attended	25 ^{a,b}	28 ^{a,b}	27 ^{a,b}
Average number of workshop sessions attended	9 ^{a,b}	10 ^{a,b}	10 ^a
Average amount of incentives received	\$104 ^{a,b}	\$122 ^{a,b}	\$134 ^{a,b}
Average number of referrals	1.0	1.0	1.0
Average number of total service contacts	18 ^a	18 ^b	20 ^{a,b}
Total sample size	820	1,737	8,886

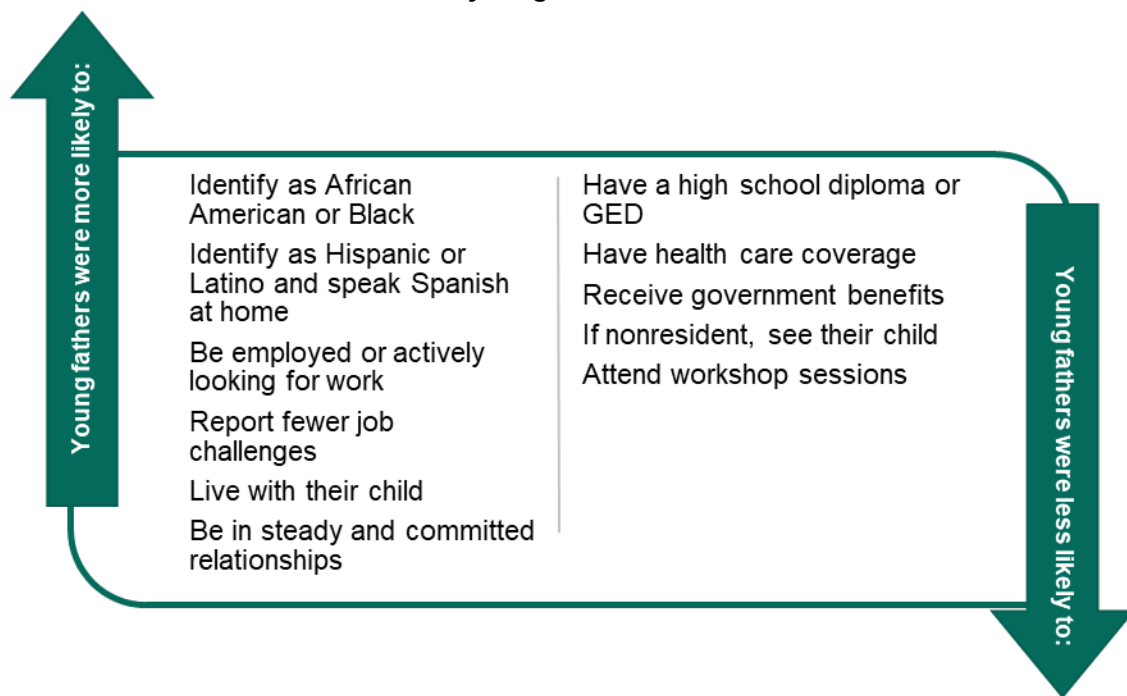
Source: Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management data system.

^a Within a row, common superscript indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between 18-24-year-olds and another age group;

^b Within a row, common superscript indicates a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between 25-29-year-olds and another age group.

In sum, young fathers currently enrolled in RF programs showed patterns of characteristics generally similar to those described in the literature, with a few exceptions related to employment (Exhibit 5). They were more racially and ethnically diverse than older fathers—that is, more likely to identify as Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino. They were more likely to be in relationships and live with their child than older fathers. Our analysis of nFORM data showed that young fathers were more likely to be employed or looking for work. Young fathers were less likely than older fathers to have a high school diploma or GED or to have health care. They also were slightly less likely to participate in services compared with older fathers, a challenge frequently noted in the literature.

Exhibit 5. Selected characteristics of fathers younger than 30



III. Program perspectives on recruiting and engaging young fathers

To better understand the challenges to and solutions for recruiting and engaging young fathers in services, we conducted a literature review and collected data from two RF programs. Other RF programs may also benefit from this data collection, as they can replicate or improve upon strategies used to overcome common challenges.

We first conducted a targeted literature review of the last 20 years of peer-reviewed studies published in the United States. However, because RF-specific research on young fathers was limited, we included research on other programs that served young men, such as employment, parenting, and adolescent pregnancy prevention programs that included fathers. To include government reports or grey literature in the review, as well as other relevant studies, we used “snowballing” techniques (see Appendix A) and examined all applicable studies from the snowball search, not just peer-reviewed studies. We focused on research in which young men (ages 18–29) made up most of the sample and that discussed challenges and recommendations for recruiting and engaging this population in services (see Appendix A for more detailed information on the literature review process).

To supplement the findings from the literature, we met with program staff and young fathers who were participating in two RF programs in which fathers ages 18 to 29 comprised a relatively large share of the total enrollment compared with other RF programs in their grant cohort. One of the programs was in the rural south and served several geographically large counties. The program primarily served Black or African American and Hispanic men, many of whom had primary custody of their children. Transportation was a common challenge for many of this program’s participants. Almost 30 percent of the site’s enrolled clients were ages 18 to 29. The other site was in the urban Midwest and primarily served Black or African American fathers who were often struggling with homelessness and had very low incomes. These fathers often did not have custody of their children. Almost 40 percent of the site’s enrolled clients were ages 18 to 29.

We conducted three data collection activities during an in-person visit to each program (see protocols in Appendix C):

1. We interviewed program directors, workshop facilitators, and recruiters to discuss topics including recruitment, engagement in services, and workshop content and format in the context of serving young fathers.
2. We conducted a focus group with young fathers who were current or past participants of the program to learn more about what motivated them to participate, to hear about the benefits they received from the program, and to gather recommendations for how other programs could best serve other fathers like them.
3. We observed a workshop session with at least one participant who was in his early to mid-twenties.

Following the site visits, we conducted a thematic analysis of these data (see Appendix A for more information about methods and analysis). The sections that follow describe the themes that emerged during the qualitative data analysis and literature review.

A. Common challenges related to recruiting young fathers

Although we sought to identify common challenges related to recruiting and engaging young fathers, the themes identified from the literature review and qualitative data collection overlap with common challenges that arise in serving fathers more broadly, regardless of age. Despite the similarities, however, these challenges appear to be more salient for young fathers. For example, historically, fathers can be more challenging to recruit into programs compared with mothers, but young fathers might be even harder to recruit than older fathers.

We identified three central challenges related to recruiting young fathers: (1) young fathers can be difficult to locate through traditional community partners, (2) young fathers often mistrust services, perhaps due to negative experiences with other organizations or systems, and (3) young fathers might doubt that they will benefit from RF services.

1. Young fathers can be difficult to locate through traditional community partners.

Although recruiting through community organizations is generally considered an effective recruitment strategy for RF and similar programs, a central challenge in recruiting young fathers is finding them through community outreach and existing recruitment networks.

Referral partnerships with community organizations that serve fathers more broadly may prove less fruitful for recruiting younger fathers. For example, an evaluation of one RF program that served fathers of all ages included research questions about meeting the needs of young fathers in their program. Despite establishing several referral partnerships with local community-based organizations, the program served only a small share of young fathers (about 5 percent of the analytic sample) (Hayward et al., 2020). A recruiter we interviewed at one site echoed this sentiment: “I haven’t seen any of our community partners...reach the younger dads, just from me also being [a young father] and seeing it now [as a recruiter].”

2. Young fathers often mistrust services, perhaps due to negative experiences with other organizations or systems.

Both program staff and the fathers we spoke with described how many young fathers express mistrust or disbelief when they learn about the program and what is offered. For example, a recruiter said, “Sometimes they think that this is just another program that’s going to let them down. So, that’s usually what I run across. They think it’s too good to be true most of the time... So, those are the dads that are standoffish. You know, they’re, ‘Oh, yeah, yeah, that’s cool, that’s cool.’ They’ll take a flyer and then the next thing you know, you walk outside, and it’s on the ground somewhere.”

Fathers’ feelings of mistrust or being “system shy” often stem from negative experiences interacting with other social service or community organizations that might have let them down in the past or treated them

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"What we hear [from] a lot of dads is... 'I went downtown for... child support, and they looked at me like I was just the worst person. And, you know, it's like, I'm here for my child... And we find they have a lot of frustration."

– RF program staff

badly. For example, a program facilitator said, “What we hear [from] a lot of dads is... ‘I went downtown for... child support, and they looked at me like I was just the worst person. And, you know, it’s like, I’m here for my child. Like I’m watching my child. I’m doing this...I might not be with [my child’s mother], but I’m not arguing...I’m trying...I’ll take any job.’ And we find they have a lot of frustration.”

Fathers might also have preconceived notions of what a fatherhood program is. For example, fathers who were a part of a study of RF programs reported that they were concerned the program was going to be judgmental and overly directive

on how to be a good parent, which they perceived as a barrier to participating in the program (Anderson, 2002).

Young fathers themselves described their initial concerns about how an outside organization would use information they shared. For example, one father said, “That was my concern. It sounded too good to be true. I thought it was just going to be another one of those programs that promise you this, promise you that...I was concerned that I was going to share my story and my past, my history...my criminal charges, my criminal history. It was going to somehow come up when I [tried] to go to court for custody...It might be used against me, and I was scared to share my story. But...it was completely different. A lot of times, some of the other fathers been through the same thing, as well as even some of the counselors.”

3. Young fathers might doubt that they will benefit from RF services.

Young fathers often do not think that fatherhood programs understand or can meet their specific needs. This skepticism may be grounded in societal or cultural expectations of masculinity which can cause men to feel uncomfortable seeking help (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2018). In addition, men might be unfamiliar with the concept of a fatherhood program because many parenting programs are directed toward mothers (Niland & Selekman, 2020). Further, men might be reluctant to participate in a fatherhood program if they are already confident in their parenting and do not see how a program could benefit them or make them an even better father (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2018). However, young fathers often have more limited experience as parents to draw on than older fathers, which might lead them to underestimate the challenges of

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"I think the main [reason fathers don't want to participate] would probably be 'I don't need that.'... . If they assume it's not for them, then it's a closed door."

– RF program recruiter

parenting. For example, one recruiter shared, “I think the main [reason fathers don’t want to participate] would probably be ‘I don’t need that.’ I remember doing some outreach out at my apartment complex. And, yeah, I had a couple of guys say, ‘I don’t need that.’ And I tried to keep them interested. ‘Hey, we’ve got some incentives. Hey, if you know anybody...’ but they just kept walking. If they assume it’s not for them, then it’s a closed door.”

B. Potential strategies to overcome recruitment challenges

When recruiting young fathers, every program must answer the “who”, “what”, “where”, and “how” of how they will reach this population. That is, they must consider where they will recruit, how they will recruit, who will do the recruiting, and what message to convey. We identified four strategies RF programs could use to overcome common recruitment challenges and address each of these considerations. (1) embed program staff in the community and recruit from places that young people frequent (where); (2) use a range of recruitment sources and communication methods (how); (3) engage past participants or program ambassadors in the recruitment process (who); and (4) tailor the recruitment message to appeal to what young fathers need most, but do not overpromise what the program can offer (what).

1. Embed program staff in the community and recruit from the places that young people frequent.

Many of the studies we reviewed suggested that fathers might be more willing to become involved with programs and services if the organization has a strong community presence (Florsheim & Hawkins, 2014; Manno et al., 2015; Martinson & Nightingale, 2008; McGirr et al., 2020; Mogro-Wilson et al., 2019). Having the program offices located in the same area where community outreach and recruitment is taking place allows for more frequent interaction between program leaders, staff, and potential participants. This could be particularly important for keeping young fathers connected to the program, both before services start or during any gaps in services (Mogro-Wilson et al., 2019). When a program has a strong community presence this can help the program demonstrate goodwill in the community and help young fathers trust and respect the program and staff. RF program leaders can look for opportunities to extend their own social capital to support young fathers and help them develop a vision for their futures beyond their immediate environmental circumstances. In two studies, fathers said that seeing program staff invested in their community was one factor motivating them to join the program (Manno et al., 2015; Mogro-Wilson et al., 2019). Program staff echoed this sentiment during our interviews. One staff member we spoke with explained how they visit a local basketball court to engage young fathers: “So it may be one of those things where like if I was [focused on] 18-year-olds, that means, yeah, I may have to go to this rec center where I know the guys are balling.” To identify where and when young fathers frequent, program staff need to build relationships within and knowledge of the community. It is also helpful if staff are from that community themselves. Other literature suggested that developing reciprocal partnerships with community agencies that recruit and serve a similar population might help with referrals (Florsheim & Hawkins, 2014; Martinson & Nightingale, 2008). Conducting extensive community outreach by participating in community events could both develop these reciprocal partnerships with community-based organizations and reach young fathers directly (Florsheim & Hawkins, 2014; Manno et al., 2015; Martinson & Nightingale, 2008; McGirr et al., 2020; Mogro-Wilson et al., 2019). Conducting outreach at a variety of sites and focusing on the places young fathers frequent, such as gyms, barbershops, and community centers, has shown promise in previous studies (Manno et al., 2015; Niland & Selekman,

2020). However, one study noted it was important not to limit recruitment to a single type of organization or location for this hard-to-reach population (Hayward et al., 2020).

Another important aspect of embedding themselves in a community is for program staff to approach recruitment without judgment or preconceived notions about interacting with young people. For example, one staff member said, “Even though the kids seem to be kind of loud and rowdy and crass, it’s like you’re okay. You know, you got to think of yourself sometimes at 18 and how you conducted yourself, so now it’s like, okay, let me have this conversation, or let me just talk or build a relationship.” Avoiding deficit framed language and messaging during outreach is also important to help fathers view the program as a resource to help other fathers like themselves act on their intention to take active roles in their children’s lives, rather than a program for men who need remediation.

2. Use a range of recruitment sources and communication methods .

Recruitment efforts also need to be varied to reach young fathers. Using a variety of outreach methods including media outlets, such as podcasts, live streaming interviews, and social media, might be particularly effective for recruiting young fathers to programs (Mogro-Wilson et al., 2019). During an interview, a program director shared their approach to social media outreach: “We tell our fathers, please check us out on Instagram, Facebook... Have your friends check us out... Yesterday, we had an orientation leading up to today. And we made that...an event [on Facebook]. And then not only do we as workers invite people that we know, but also our agency will invite people that they might know...Hey, how is it easy for me to refer someone to you? You go on the social media page, or you go on our website, and you put in an inquiry.”

Using multiple methods of communication is also important in encouraging fathers to attend initial program sessions (Mogro-Wilson et al., 2019). For example, texting in addition to calling and in-person contact could help programs reach young fathers consistently. However, the young fathers we spoke to said they were unlikely to respond via email or to answer calls from a phone number they did not recognize. They suggested texting was the best way to reach them, especially if messages were short and to the point.

3. Engage past participants or program ambassadors in the recruitment process.

To reach young fathers, program recruiters should also be young fathers, ideally matching potential clients on other demographics, as well, such as primary language or race and ethnicity (Florsheim & Hawkins, 2014; Mogro-Wilson et al., 2019; Niland & Selekman, 2020; Pearson et al., 2000). To help align the characteristics of recruitment staff with the intended service population, programs could hire graduates of the program as recruiters, which increases the likelihood of having similar lived experiences (Mogro-Wilson et al., 2018, 2019). When asked about why the program’s staff was successful at recruiting young fathers, a staff member shared, “They’re in the same places as our dads are in the community and everything, facing the exact same challenges—multiple co-parents, work, and child support... [The staff and the potential participants] are speaking the exact same language.” This shared experience between the program staff and potential participants helps us forge a meaningful connection from the first interaction.

Even if program graduates cannot be formally hired, studies in our review suggested relying on peer-to-peer referrals is particularly effective. Similarly, the analysis of young fathers served by the 2020 cohort of RF grant recipients showed that young fathers who enrolled were most likely to indicate that they heard about the program through word of mouth.

Previous research and the fathers we spoke with during the focus group highlighted two ways that word of mouth referrals were most effective:

1. Potential participants see firsthand how the program addressed a father's specific needs through case management or other services. During the focus group, one participant described how he was interested in the RF program because it had helped his friend apply for and get accepted into a housing assistance program that enabled the friend to get his own apartment.
2. Potential participants also appreciated learning from recruiters who had completed the program about how going through the program positively impacted their lives. According to participants, these personal testimonials highlighted tangible ways enrolling in services could help improve their circumstances (Mogro-Wilson et al., 2019). As another father we spoke with shared, "If you went through the program and honestly got something from it, just the fact that you went through it and chose to follow through and complete it, that means a lot."
4. **Tailor the recruitment message to appeal to what young fathers need most, but do not overpromise what the program can offer.**

Many of the program staff we spoke with described the need to ask open-ended questions and learn more about fathers during recruitment. Rather than providing all the information about the program all at once, tailoring the message to describe how the RF program can meet some of the specific needs that fathers express draws a clear connection to the benefits of participating in the program. For example, if fathers reported they needed help improving their financial situation or child support responsibilities, describing the ways that RF programs can help to improve parenting and relationship skills might seem too abstract or less relevant.

This strategy was demonstrated by a story a program director told about a father he recently recruited into the program: "[His] oldest was 4 years old when [the child's] mom was just coming out of jail, dealing with drugs, so she wasn't stable to keep him. And he had a set of twins. [He was wearing a shirt that had a picture of the twins' mother on it], and she just recently passed. So when I heard that, I was like, 'I don't know what I can tell you about our group. I don't want to overwhelm you with too much. I was like, but ...if you just need [these] sessions to have a place to be vulnerable and talk, you should probably join us.' And so...I left him a flyer... If I [had]...just started telling him about everything we do, it's like, that's not what [would help]. This man is going through some hurt and some pain. He just needs that support."

However, program staff also stressed the importance of avoiding making promises during the recruitment period that the program will not be able to fulfill. One recruiter said, "When they're promised certain things and they don't get it, it's kind of like they spiral out. It's not a letdown, it's a spiral, because they think, 'I'm finally getting over the hump.' So, what I saw in the past with other organizations is they come out and say, 'We're going to do this, we're going to do this, we're going to help you with this,' and they don't help the guys. You know? And, as a young dad, that's hurtful... Because you're fresh, you're thinking, 'My kids are going to be good from this, I'm going to be good from this, my family is going to be good.'"

Building trust with young fathers during initial interactions in the recruitment phase can be advantageous later. Having a strong rapport with and trust in the program staff can help young fathers complete the program and motivate them to spread the word about the program after they finish it (Martinez et al., 2013; Mogro-Wilson et al., 2018, 2019; Young & Holcomb, 2007).

C. Common challenges related to engaging young fathers in services

Even after successfully recruiting young fathers, programs might still face challenges keeping those fathers engaged in services and making sure the program meets fathers' needs. Several themes emerged about challenges in engaging young fathers in services: (1) young fathers tend to have urgent needs and often are juggling competing priorities, (2) many young fathers are grappling with their identities, as men and as fathers, and they are unsure about their future career paths, (3) young fathers might not be mentally or emotionally ready to participate in a fatherhood program, (4) some topics covered in workshops might be less relevant to young fathers, and (5) young fathers might be particularly hesitant to open up during workshop sessions because of peer norms and experiences in "classroom" settings. We also identified several strategies that programs could use to better tailor the program experience to fit young fathers' specific needs and keep them engaged in services.

1. Young fathers tend to have urgent needs (such as housing issues, transportation issues, custody battles) and often are juggling competing priorities.

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"They're younger guys, so things come up. You know, maybe a girl texts them and they're like, 'I'm stuck between my session today and this girl. I want to go see her.' Or, you know, they don't have transportation because they're young guys. Like they're just living at this point. They're trying to figure it out. So, I feel like the younger guys have more obstacles."

– RF program staff

Young fathers often face challenges meeting some of their basic needs (Mogro-Wilson et al., 2018). One program facilitator noted, "I would just say sometimes with the younger dads, we've had dads [that are] all over the place. They're working different jobs. They're over here. They might be couch surfing, so they're on the move a little bit more." Another staff member said, "They're younger guys, so things come up. You know, maybe a girl texts them and they're like, 'I'm stuck between my session today and this girl. I want to go see her.' Or, you know, they don't have transportation because they're young guys. Like they're just living at this point. They're trying to figure it out. So, I feel like the younger guys have more obstacles." The lack of stability that many young fathers experience can make it

difficult for them to prioritize attending workshop sessions on a regular basis.

With multiple needs, young fathers often must balance competing priorities, which might make it difficult for them to find the time to participate in RF services (Florsheim & Hawkins, 2014; Niland & Selekmán, 2020). Young fathers might not prioritize program participation if they do not perceive the program as immediately helping them (Anderson et al., 2002). In general, fathers face economic and societal pressure to be employed to provide for their families. Young fathers might need to balance their immediate financial responsibility with furthering their education to pursue long-term career goals. In our analysis of the data from the 2020 cohort of RF grant recipients, we found that young fathers were less likely to have a high school degree; therefore, many young fathers struggle to obtain their education while trying to provide financially for their family. Also, many of the program staff we spoke with noted that the young fathers in their program were more likely than the older fathers to work more than one job, have physically demanding jobs, or have nontraditional work schedules, which can make it difficult for them to participate in RF programming. In one study, a young father said it was difficult for him to participate in a program when he was physically exhausted from work and juggling other responsibilities (Anderson et al., 2002).

2. Many young fathers are grappling with their identities, as men and as fathers, and they are unsure about their future career paths.

Men in their late teens and early twenties are often still trying to understand themselves and who they want to be as men. Young fathers face the added pressure of navigating their identity as a father and their role as a parent. Although many new parents struggle with stepping into this role, this challenge is particularly strong for young fathers. For example, a program facilitator said, “They don’t know, essentially, who they are or what they really want to do. And so navigating those waters with them is different than a father who kind of knows who he is...” Another staff member described how many young fathers are often struggling to transition from focusing on themselves to needing to put their child first. They said, “Now you’re shifting from thinking about yourself, you know, fresh 18, 19 and it’s me, me, me. Which is fine, it should be at that age. [But] now you’re trying to force your brain to switch into putting a child first or your co-parent first. That’s extremely tough... You kind of got to start flipping that mental switch. And if nobody is telling you to...lights don’t just turn on, on their own.”

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– RF program recruiter

In addition, staff highlighted how important employment services are for this population, because so many young fathers are still unsure about what career path they want to pursue. One staff member said, “For an older dad, he’s more established most times. He kind of knows what he wants to do. He knows the route that he wants to go. For the younger dads, they’re still kind of figuring it out... A lot of them, they don’t know the career path they want to go into at that age... They have to find something that’s not just a job, but a career... The career assessments, the referrals, all of that to a younger dad is crucial.” Although many RF programs are uniquely positioned to help young fathers address their uncertainty, some young fathers might not be ready to fully engage with all of the services that programs offer.

3. Young fathers might not be mentally or emotionally ready to participate in a fatherhood program.

A common theme that arose from our interviews with program participants and staff was the connection between a young fathers’ maturity and their ability to fully engage in services. One of the young fathers we spoke with stressed this connection: “[Young fathers] have to be mature before they can do this. I ain’t gonna lie...a lot of my people from here, my age, they wouldn’t be able to do it. They can’t even sit down for 30 minutes. So it’s like, you have to want to do it.” Similarly, staff mentioned how young fathers’ brains are still developing, and “there’s just some level of certain decision making that hasn’t even unlocked yet.”

Program staff described several mental or emotional challenges that prevented young fathers from engaging in services, in addition to physical ones. For example, when asked what keeps young fathers from attending, a program facilitator said, “Work, you know, like relationships, of course, transportation, self-doubt. I’ve seen that a lot. Guys would tell me something one week and then the next week they’ll say, ‘Yeah, I just wasn’t sure if this was for me,’ because the sessions get so deep sometimes that they’re not used to it. They’re not used to being able to share and have those conversations.” Although having an open and safe space to share experiences about fatherhood might be unfamiliar to many men, young

fathers who are still maturing and developing might particularly struggle to fully engage.

4. Some topics covered in workshops might be less relevant to young fathers.

Young fathers might be less willing to remain engaged and involved with the workshop sessions if sessions are unrelatable to their needs and experiences. Although the skills that are foundational to any fatherhood program—parenting, developing and maintaining relationships, and achieving financial stability—can be applied to many stages of life, sometimes the topics discussed during workshop sessions are less relevant to young fathers. Typically, young fathers have young children (that is, infants and toddlers) who might not have reached some of the developmental phases that are discussed in common RF workshop curricula. For example, healthy approaches to discipline are less relevant to fathers of infants than to fathers of school-aged children or teenagers. Although a young father can still learn about these topics and participate in discussions of what he might do when his child is older, young fathers might not have much lived experience to draw from. One program facilitator highlighted this factor: “What the curriculum does best is connect you with, you know, the experience you had as a child and address some of the issues or the strength that you might have as a father... the lived experience that a 20-year-old has compared with a 50-year-old is night and day.”

5. Young fathers might be particularly hesitant to open up during workshop sessions because of peer norms and more recent past experiences in “classroom” settings.

Peer norms are of heightened importance for young fathers, who, like most young people, are often focused on peer belonging (Mogro-Wilson et al., 2018). Young fathers who believe attending a fatherhood program is unacceptable to their larger peer group might be unwilling to engage with services. Even among the young fathers who enroll and attend, many of the program staff noted that they were more reluctant to speak up and share their experiences compared with older fathers during early workshop sessions. Nearly all of the young fathers we spoke with during the focus groups also said they did not speak up during the first few sessions. However, after facilitators encouraged them to share their opinions and their peers also began speaking, they were more likely to engage.

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“It definitely felt like a classroom setting, [so] I sat quiet as a church mouse.”

– Young father

Other young fathers described how they were expecting the program to have more typical teacher–student dynamics, which reminded them too much of their more recent negative experiences in school. One father said, “It definitely felt like a classroom setting, [so] I sat quiet as a church mouse.” Many of the fathers noted that they were expecting the facilitator to be in a teacher role and lead the conversation. At first, they were cautious to speak up, until they recognized that the program encouraged a discussion-based approach rather than lecture.

D. Potential strategies to overcome engagement challenges

We identified four strategies that programs could use to overcome common engagement challenges: (1) create a comfortable, inviting program culture that encourages young fathers’ contributions regardless of their stage in life, (2) encourage fathers to keep notes so they can reference information in the future when it becomes more relevant, (3) enlist older men in the groups to act as mentors, and (4) modify existing services to accommodate young fathers.

1. Create a comfortable, inviting program culture that encourages young fathers' contributions regardless of their stage in life.

For fathers to feel welcome and safe sharing their personal stories, program staff should avoid stereotypes and cocreate an inclusive vision of fatherhood. Staff who work with young fathers should be conscious of and strive to reduce biases—including their own—about early fatherhood (Martinez et al., 2013; McGirr et al., 2020). For example, staff should challenge common assumptions that young fathers are irresponsible or that they do not want to be in their children's lives. But avoiding negativity is not enough. RF programs can also help fathers develop a broad conceptualization of a father's roles, beyond just their ability to provide financially, particularly for men who became a father at a young age (Randles, 2019). Fathers play an important role in their children's development, and program staff should be prepared to empower fathers to take steps that align with a father's own definitions of good fathering, such as engaging with their children in healthy ways and achieving financial responsibility (Randles, 2019).

Staff from both programs that we visited emphasized their efforts to include young fathers in conversations and to validate fathers' experiences regardless of their age. For example, a facilitator shared, "We make sure that the younger guys, too, know what you have to say is important, and we're going to listen to what you have to say." When interviewing a group of young fathers, Parikh (2013) found the men enjoyed expressing themselves and feeling their voices were heard, which was a rare experience for them. The young fathers we spoke with also described how the process of opening up and feeling comfortable sharing their own experiences grew over time. They often described the conversations with the other fathers as being their favorite part of the experience. As one father said, "I thought it was just going to be a bunch of people talking, like, trying to get you to do things a certain way. So when it wasn't, it kind of shocked me. So it ended up being better than what I thought... It was just more like a collective conversation."

One strategy that several program facilitators highlighted was calling on young fathers during program sessions to ask them specific questions. One father described his reaction to this approach: "[The facilitators] actually say, Mr. [last name], how do you feel about that? And they call you out. And you might say two or three things. Like, 'I felt how he felt. Yeah, what he mentioned.' But then eventually you're just like, 'I'm about to speak my mind.'" One program facilitator said he encouraged young fathers who were hesitant to first share about their children, rather than personal information about themselves: "Most of the time, they're quiet because they don't think [anyone] can relate to them. So, I'll say something. Even if they have a son [and I only have a daughter], I'll say, 'Hey, you know, I've got a nephew [who's] that age, and we do this and we do that.' So, I find something to relate to them. Even if I can't relate to them... One thing I've noticed is everybody wants to talk about their kids."

Creating a space where young fathers feel welcome encourages them to remain involved. Programs that use materials designed for and representing young men, such as materials featuring pictures of young fathers, might help fathers engage in the program content (Martinez et al., 2013; Niland & Selekman, 2020). As with any program working with fathers, communications should be directed to the father and not seek to engage fathers through a coparent or female partner (Martinez et al., 2013). Programs should also offer activities that appeal to young men, such as game nights with food, pool tables, television, and video games (Niland & Selekman, 2020).

2. Encourage fathers to keep notes so they can reference information in the future when it becomes more relevant.

Several of the young fathers we spoke with highlighted how they returned to their workshop materials after the classes had ended to review information that might have been less relevant at the time. For example, one father said, “They couldn’t help me at this moment, but I took all the notes and I got all the websites and stuff like that [for] when I’m ready... I still got the book, so, like, I was reading a lot. They told us I could write in the book. So then like when I’m going through something or I’m looking at something, I’ll just go in my book. I’m going to go back and just start reading on the page... It still helped me out, like if I was in school. Like, it’s what they said about when you take a test, if you don’t know it off the top of your head, you can always go back and just check it again.”

3. Enlist older men in the groups to act as mentors.

Providing opportunities in the program to connect with other fathers provides support and a sense of belonging for fathers of any age. Multigenerational gatherings focused on fatherhood help young fathers normalize their experiences by connecting with others about fatherhood (McGirr et al., 2020). Young fathers who have older fathers as role models might be able to better embrace their fathering role. According to one program facilitator, “Having those older guys to say, ‘Hey, I was in your position, and this is what I did, and I messed up when I did it,’ ...gives those guys...[a] relaxing feeling like, ‘Okay, I can mess up, because, this guy, he came back from certain situations.’”

Older fathers can also offer young fathers hope and encouragement that their situations can improve, which is a message they might not hear in other areas of their life. For example, one program facilitator said, “These older men provide so much hope for the younger dads in the program like, hey, yeah ... you might go through five, six years of hell, but I’m telling you the peace on the other side is worth it... You can [hear from] another dad that’s been through the child support system, been through a custody battle, and they’re telling you like just hold on. It’s worth it. Your kids will appreciate it in the end. So I think there’s value to having those older men in the group.” Another staff member shared, “The older dads just offer that perspective of it’s going to be all right... You’ll get to where you want to be. Without that, there’s not much hope. It can be a dark space trying to be a dad and someone’s telling you, you can’t be the type of dad you want to be.” Similarly, a young father describing his experience in preparing for court to get custody of his daughter expressed how at first, he never thought it would be possible to get joint custody. However, with the support and encouragement from the older fathers in the group who had been through a similar process, he gained more confidence. He shared, “[The older fathers experiences] helped me... They helped me form my words... It also let me know that I’m not the only one in the world that went through this. So it’s like, if they can go through it and get through it, I can too.” Program staff should be mindful that these mentoring relationships do not feel prescribed, but rather that they form organically and voluntarily to allow young fathers to also experience growth, reflection, and exploration on their own.

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“[The older fathers experiences] helped me... They helped me form my words... It also let me know that I’m not the only one in the world that went through this. So it’s like, if they can go through it and get through it, I can too.”

– Young father

4. Modify existing services to accommodate young fathers.

Young fathers often have goals and needs that align with RF's key services. However, the services might be even more beneficial to young fathers if the programs modify or tailor their services to more directly respond to their common needs, such as limited work histories, the challenges of parenting young children, and less experience navigating the world as adults.

Many young fathers have employment and financial stability goals for themselves and their families (Martinez et al., 2013; Martinson & Nightingale, 2008; McGirr et al., 2020; Mogro-Wilson et al., 2019; Niland & Selekman, 2020; Young & Holcomb, 2007). RF programs are already well suited to help fathers make progress toward these goals by providing case management and other job placement services to facilitate employment opportunities (for example, gift cards to purchase work clothing or free haircuts before interviews) (Martinez et al., 2013; Martinson & Nightingale, 2008; McGirr et al., 2020; Mogro-Wilson et al., 2019; Niland & Selekman, 2020; Young & Holcomb, 2007). However, RF programs could make sure these types of services cater to the specific needs of young fathers, who might have less education and work experience than older fathers and need more support to reach their financial and employment goals. For example, RF programs might work with young fathers to help them reach educational goals, such as getting a GED or enroll in college, while also balancing financial responsibilities to their families.

In addition, young fathers are often motivated by their desire to be a good parent (Randles, 2019). Programs should consider the likely young age of the fathers' children in their content and activities. For example, programs could sponsor events and activities fathers can bring their young children to, such as trips to a local zoo or water park. These activities can help young fathers deepen their relationship with their children (Niland & Selekman, 2020).

Staff frequently described how young fathers often need more intensive or hands-on case management than older fathers. For example, one facilitator who also served as a case manager explained, "The younger dads, they need a lot. A lot of times, older dads, you find them coming from one thing. Now, if you get an older dad who's coming out of the penitentiary or something, they're probably going to need that same [hand-holding] that you have to do with the younger dads. But I think with the younger dads, they have multiple challenges and certain appearances they're trying to keep up. So I think you'll probably find yourself having to do more work with them and hand-holding... An older dad more is focused."

Strong individual relationships with case managers can be a key element in fathers believing the program supports them (McGirr et al., 2020; Young & Holcomb, 2007). For example, in two of the studies we reviewed, fathers said this personal relationship helped them feel comfortable discussing the details of difficult experiences they were going through, and they often craved this type of connection in their lives (Mogro-Wilson et al., 2018; Parikh, 2013).

Fathers' connections to the program can extend beyond typical services. Often fathers continued reaching out to their case managers or facilitators in times of crisis even after their services had officially concluded. For example, one program facilitator said, "Some of our [young] fathers will be kind of needy in the beginning, and then when they get some of those services and take away some of those barriers, they'll be there to support the other fathers, or they'll come back if there's an issue, you know, because life is hard."

IV. Conclusion

Many young fathers are at a pivotal point in their lives and could benefit from supports that RF programs offer. For example, they are simultaneously grappling with their identities as men and fathers. They might be finishing their education and striving for financial stability for themselves and their families. They are navigating new coparenting relationships and responsibilities. Yet they represent only a small fraction of clients typically served by RF programs (Avellar et al., 2021), and those who enroll tend to participate in fewer services than older fathers.

This paper sought to examine the challenges RF programs face identifying, enrolling, and serving young fathers, and how programs have addressed these challenges. To do so, we conducted a descriptive analysis of young fathers served by the 2020 cohort of RF grant recipients; a literature review of the last two decades of peer reviewed studies; and qualitative interviews, focus groups, and observations with two current RF programs.

Many of the themes we identified were similar to those about programs serving fathers of any age. For example, fathers typically might not be connected to social services, making them difficult to find and identify. With a history of negative experiences with broader systems, such as criminal justice and child support, many fathers distrust the programs' offers and might be reluctant to participate in services. Fathers are juggling multiple commitments to family, employers, and community.

Despite these commonalities, the challenges might be more acute and the solutions more nuanced for young fathers. For example, it might not be enough to recruit through community organizations, a common best practice for RF programs. Programs might have to invest even more resources in recruitment to work with a wider range of partners, especially those that already engage young fathers; take time to establish their staff's presence in the community to build trust; and use many approaches to connect to young fathers, such as texting or social media. Programs must not only create a safe and father-friendly environment—as all RF programs should do—they must also be aware of young fathers' emotional and mental readiness to engage in services. Young fathers' optimism upon hearing about the programs' services could make them vulnerable to the disappointment of unmet promises. They might benefit from more intensive support, especially when they begin services. But programs must also be careful not to overwhelm them. Young people might be more swayed by others' opinions, which also creates an opportunity for programs to connect with them through their peers and older fathers to mentor them in services.

Overall, the literature we reviewed and the data we collected support the conclusion that involving young fathers in RF services is an opportunity for prevention by providing young fathers with the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive. For example, one staff member shared, "I think [it] is crucial [to catch] them early.... 19, when you're fresh having a kid. You know, before you owe \$10,000 in child support, before she takes the kid away. Before you're trying to fight to see your kid from another county." Similarly, the young fathers we spoke with who had completed an RF program praised the benefits of participating and felt strongly that other young fathers would benefit, as well. One father shared, "I feel like this is what younger dads like me need. They need to be in programs like this, because we don't know. We're kids ourselves, you know, we're still young. So we don't really know much about raising a baby. I feel like we just need this for guidance, to help us before our journey starts with the kids."

The approach we used has some limitations. The qualitative data collection was restricted to a small sample (two RF programs) that is not representative of all RF grant recipients who serve young fathers.

We also only conducted focus groups with fathers who were already participating in or had completed the program. Therefore, we cannot directly address why fathers did not engage in services. However, we were able to speak to staff about their perceptions as to why young fathers do not take up or complete RF services, and we also were able to ask fathers about their own hesitations around participating. The literature search focused on peer-reviewed literature and might not have been as comprehensive of other published sources that are not typically found in academic research databases. However, we did include any relevant non-peer-reviewed sources that came up in our database search and used a snowballing technique to overcome this limitation.

The findings presented in this white paper help fill a gap in the literature on how to serve young fathers. To date, there has been limited research on the needs and characteristics of fathers in their teens and twenties, and even less on young fathers enrolled in RF programs. A better understanding of young fathers and how to address their needs can enable programs to reach more young fathers and help them achieve their personal and parenting goals.

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Appendix A

Methods

nFORM analysis

To understand the differences and similarities among young and older fathers served by RF programs, we conducted a descriptive analysis of client characteristics and program participation. RF grant recipients are required to enter performance measure data into the Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management (nFORM) data system. Data include surveys that clients complete at enrollment, their first workshop, and last workshop, as well as information reported by grantees, such as client attendance in services. We included several variables from the surveys and performance measures described in Exhibit A1.

Exhibit A.1. Variables used in analysis

Variable Name	Source	Description
Demographic and attitudinal variables		
Race	ACS	A series of six binary variables indicating the participant's race
Hispanic or Latino	ACS	A binary variable indicating whether the participant indicates they are Hispanic or Latino
Primary language spoken	ACS	A series of three binary variables indicating the participant's primary language
Employment status	ACS	A series of six binary variables indicating the participant's employment status
Currently looking for work	ACS	A binary variable that indicates whether the participant is actively looking for work
Barriers to employment	ACS	An average composite score of several variables indicating the degree of challenges the participant faces in keeping a job
Job skills (range = 0–5)	Entrance	An average composite score of several variables indicating the participant's desire for additional job-related skills
Has a high school degree	Entrance	A binary variable indicating whether the participant has at least a high school degree or GED
Income	Entrance	A series of eight binary variables that indicate the participant's monthly income
Receipt of any government assistance	ACS	A binary variable indicating whether the participant receives any form of government assistance.
Difficulty paying bills	Entrance	A continuous variable indicating whether how much difficulty the participant has paying their monthly bills
Has health insurance	ACS	A binary variable that indicates whether the participant currently has insurance
Relationship status	Entrance	A series of three binary variables that indicate the participant's current relationship status
Relationship satisfaction (range = 1–4)	Entrance	An average composite score of several variables indicating how satisfied a participant is with their current romantic partner
Lives with current partner	Entrance	A binary variable that indicates whether the participant currently lives with their partner
Expecting a child	ACS	A binary variable that indicates whether the participant is expecting a child
Number of children	ACS	A continuous variable that indicates the number of biological children the participant has
Lives with youngest child	Entrance	A binary variable indicating whether the participant currently lives with their youngest child

Variable Name	Source	Description
Frequency of seeing child in the past month	Entrance	A continuous variable indicating when the participant last saw their youngest child
Co-parenting relationship satisfaction (range = 1–5)	Entrance	An average composite score of several variables indicating how positive the coparenting relationship is between the participant and the mother of their youngest child
How they heard about the program	ACS	A series of nine binary variables that indicate how the participant heard about the program
Reason for enrolling	ACS	A series of nine binary variables that indicate how the reason the participant enrolled in the program
Service delivery variables		
Total workshop hours attended	nFORM	A continuous variable indicating the total number of hours received from all workshops the participant attended
Number of workshop sessions attended	nFORM	A continuous variable indicating the total number of sessions from all workshops the participant attended
Incentives received	nFORM	A continuous variable indicating the total dollar amount of incentives received
Number of referrals	nFORM	A continuous variable indicating the number of referrals the participant received in the program
Number of service contacts	nFORM	A continuous variable indicating the total number of service contacts received by the participant

ACS = Applicant Characteristics Survey; nFORM = Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management.

Our sample included participants who completed an RF workshop between April 2021 through February 2023. We conducted a complete case analysis, resulting in a final analytic sample size was 11,443. We used a multivariate analysis of variance to conduct this analysis. Age was our independent variable and the remaining variable served as our dependent variables.

Literature review

We focused on peer-reviewed studies recently conducted in the United States. Generally, the literature search was restricted to the past 20 years (January 2000 – February 2023). We searched for studies using databases to identify materials from multiple disciplines. To include government reports or grey literature in the review, as well as other relevant studies, we used “snowballing” techniques (described below) and examined all applicable studies from the snowball search, not just peer-reviewed studies.

Exhibit A.2. Summary of strategy for the literature search

Search parameters	Details
Limits	Published since 2000; U.S. based; English language; peer reviewed
Targeted disciplines	Psychology, social work, sociology, public health, child development, public policy, program evaluation
Databases	Academic search Premier, EconLit, Google Scholar, PsycINFO, PubMed, SocINDEX
Search terms	(recruitment or retention or engagement or participation or attendance) and ("young men" or "young adults" or "young fathers") and ("job training" or "employment services" or "employment programs" or "workforce programs" or "workforce services" or "responsible fatherhood")

The series of searches yielded approximately 1,310 articles for review. We narrowed the results to relevant studies by using a multiphase screening process. This process, based on guidance from a recent systematic review of meta-analyses (Xiao and Watson 2019), went as follows:

- For each search, we screened for face validity based on title alone. If the title referenced the topic of interest, we screened it in.
- For those studies screened in as possibly relevant based on their title, we conducted a thorough review of the abstract. Abstracts were deemed relevant if they discussed recruiting and engaging young fathers in a context or population relevant for HMRE and RF programs. We excluded studies that were published outside of the United States.
- Finally, we reviewed the full manuscripts of all studies screened in from the abstract review. We also reviewed the reference lists of the full-text studies to find other relevant studies published in the last 10 years that the searches might have missed (that is, a snowball method).

A total of 34 articles met inclusion criteria for the literature review. We then extracted key information from each article, which we recorded in an Excel spreadsheet. This information included: the study's APA citation, the study's focus (that is, recruitment, retention, engagement), the type of program or intervention (for example, responsible fatherhood program, parenting program), and a summary of the study's key findings. We then analyzed the key findings for common themes or recommendations for identifying, enrolling, and serving young fathers. For a complete list of studies included in the literature review, please see Appendix B.

Qualitative data collection

Site selection

To identify programs that serve a greater proportion of young fathers, we used data from the nFORM grantee data system to explore program enrollment data from April 7, 2021, through August 31, 2022. Using these data, we narrowed the search to 14 programs that enrolled at least 75 fathers between the ages of 18 and 29 and where fathers in this age range comprised at least 25 percent of total enrollment. We then consulted with Public Strategies—an organization that provided programmatic technical assistance to RF grant recipients during the first two grant years—to identify the grant recipients with a record of high-quality implementation. Ultimately, we identified four grantees for further consideration. We then emailed the program directors of the two programs who served the greatest proportion and number of young fathers. Both programs agreed to participate in the study.

IRB approval

The study team worked with Health Media Lab to secure IRB approval for the data collection. We submitted the recruitment materials, instruments and protocols, and a description of the study, including steps to protect participants' confidentiality and privacy.

Staff interviews

We conducted 45- to 60-minute interviews with program directors, recruiters, and facilitators for each program (up to 9 participants across the two programs). We sought to understand the specific approaches that programs used to identify, interest, and engage young fathers in the program. We also asked about several issues highlighted in the research, such as the programs' use of social media, how the programs

help young fathers feel heard, whether younger fathers and older fathers are included in the same workshops, and program teaching styles.

Focus groups

To hear from young fathers directly, we conducted two 60-minute focus groups with four or five clients at each site (up to nine clients total). Program staff helped us recruit fathers younger than 30 who have attended at least two workshop sessions. Speaking to fathers who attended program services allowed us to learn why they joined and what their experiences have been.

Workshop observation

Workshops are typically the centerpiece of RF programs. For that reason, we observed a workshop session that included at least one young father. The two site visit team members sat at the back of the room where the workshop session was taking place and noted their observations using the observation protocol included in Appendix C.

Approach and analysis

Two FRAMING study team members were present during the interviews and focus groups. One served as the primary moderator and the other took notes and asked clarifying or follow-up questions, as necessary. With participants' permission, we audio recorded the interviews and focus groups to make sure our notes were complete. After the site visits, we had the recordings transcribed and uploaded the transcripts to a project file in NVivo, a qualitative coding software.

The two site visitors developed an initial list of high-level codes based on the literature and their experiences during the site visits (see Exhibit A3 for the codebook). Each site visitor independently coded one to two interview or focus group transcripts and met to discuss their coding, resolved any differences, and changed the codes, as necessary. They then divided the remaining transcripts between them and coded them using NVivo. Once the transcripts were coded, the team analyzed the results, focusing on the frequency with which they heard certain themes and identified how programs successfully engaged young fathers and how they could improve.

We had planned to use a similar coding scheme to analyze the workshop observations, but we ended up having limited observations with young fathers (one young father in each session). Given the limited information, we used the observations to provide contextual information and inform the interview and focus group coding, rather than doing formal coding of the observation notes.

Exhibit A.3. Thematic codebook for qualitative data analysis of interviews and focus groups

Topic	Code	Description
Program context	1.1 Program description and goals	Descriptions of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the program is structured • Types of workshops offered • Case management approach • Other services offered • What they hope fathers will get out of the program • Information about curriculum
	1.2. Workshop structure	Descriptions of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency of workshop sessions • Length of sessions • Total number of hours • Where workshops are located
	1.3. Demographic characteristics	Descriptions of a typical fathers' demographic characteristics (race/ethnicity, age, employment, etc.)
	1.4. Fathers' personal histories or specific needs	Descriptions of fathers' backgrounds, past experiences, needs that they have come to the program with to get help on (for example, history of incarceration, help with co-parent or child support system)
Strategies	2.1. Recruitment strategies	Descriptions of strategies used to recruit young fathers (for example, going where they are in the community; word of mouth; social media)
	2.2. Recruitment sources	Description of recruitment sources such as referral sources, how fathers typically learn about the program
	2.3. Retention or engagement strategies	Descriptions of strategies used to retain or engage young fathers (for example, making examples specific; having flexibility to accommodate changing work schedules, sending text message reminders ahead of class)
	2.4. Workshop dynamics or delivery	Descriptions of how facilitators encourage fathers to participate, how the facilitator engages fathers, how to get fathers speak up, strategies to manage conversations/discussions
	2.5. Innovations or ideas	Descriptions of approaches that they would like to use with young fathers, but haven't yet (for example, recruiting through churches, updating swag to be more relevant)
Challenges	3.1. Recruitment challenge	Descriptions of challenges in recruiting young fathers (for example, hard to reach, busy schedules)
	3.2. Retention or engagement challenge	Descriptions of challenges in retaining or engaging young fathers in services (for example, barriers to participation, lack of interest in the curriculum, transportation, working multiple jobs with variable schedules)

Topic	Code	Description
Comparing younger vs. older fathers	4.1. Program benefits	What young vs. older fathers get out of participating in the program (whether similar or different)
	4.2. Motivation to participate	Perceptions of what motivates fathers to participate (whether similar or different)
	4.3. Stage of life	Fathers' attitudes, mindsets, priorities related to the stage of life that the father is in (for example maturity level, readiness for change)
	4.4 Barriers to participation	Factors for young vs. older fathers that get in the way of fathers participating (whether similar or different). For example, inconsistent schedule, child care, exhaustion, etc.
	4.5. Fathers' perceptions or assumptions about the program	Fathers' own perceptions (or staff perceptions) about what young vs. older fathers think or assume about the program
Recommendations	5.1. Recruitment recommendations	Recommendations to other programs of how to best recruit young fathers
	5.2. Program experience recommendations	Recommendations to other programs of how to improve the program experience for young fathers
Additional Topics	6.1. Mixed aged cohorts	Descriptions of the benefits or drawbacks of mixed age cohorts
	6.2. Training needs	References to types of training staff have received or would like to receive in the future
	6.3. Other	Text you feel is important to code that doesn't fit in any of our existing codes (the team can discuss whether we need to establish a new code)
Notable Quotes	7.1. Notable quotes	Particularly good quotes that we might want to highlight in our report

Appendix B

Full Reference List of Articles Included in the Literature Review

- Anderson, E. A., Kohler, J. K., & Letiecq, B. L. (2002). Low-income fathers and “Responsible Fatherhood” programs: A qualitative investigation of participants’ experiences. *Family Relations*, 51, 148–155.
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Appendix C

Interview, Focus Group, and Workshop Observation Protocols

Program Director Interview Protocol

A. Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. Today we would like to talk about your experience working with young fathers at {Program Name}. In this project, the Administration for Children and Families has contracted Mathematica to better understand how programs recruit and engage young fathers, who we are defining as fathers younger than 30. We know that RF programs often find it challenging to recruit and engage young fathers in services even though many young fathers could benefit from them. We would like to identify some strategies or lessons learned about working with young fathers that we could share with other programs.

[Share consent form and review each section of the form]

Do you consent to participate in this interview?

{Notetaker first name} will be taking notes during our discussion today. If it is okay with you, we would also like to audio record our discussion. Only members of our research team will have access to this recording, and we will destroy it after we complete our study. The recording will only be used to aid our note taking and check that we have correctly described your feedback. No one from your organization will hear this recording.

May we record this discussion?

[MODERATOR: START THE RECORDING]

We have grouped the questions into three overarching topics to help us organize our discussion. First, we would like to learn more about your program and services. Next, we want to know more about recruiting younger fathers. Finally, we would like to learn more about how to keep young fathers engaged with the program.

B. Information Gathering

Any questions before we get started?

1. To start off, please state your title, a brief description of your responsibilities, and how long you have worked at [program].

Program context

2. Let's start by learning a little bit more about your program. Can you please briefly describe your program, such as the goals of your program, staffing and service locations, and the services you offer?
 - a. Which service do fathers usually participate in first? Is there a typical sequence of services?
 - b. How long has your program been working with fathers?
 - c. How many locations do you have? Do you host your workshops onsite or do you co-locate workshops, for example, hold a workshop at a community partner organization's location? *If co-locate*, what are the benefits and challenges to co-locating with a community partner?
3. How would you describe the population of fathers that you typically serve? (*Probes*: demographics, socioeconomic, family and parenting status, location, challenges, strengths).
4. How does your program define young fathers, such as their ages or whether they are first-time fathers?

5. Does your program specifically aim to serve young fathers?
 - a. *If yes*, How long have you been trying to recruit young fathers into the program? Why does your program seek to serve young fathers? How does your program focus on serving young fathers?
 - b. *If young fathers not intentionally recruited*:
 - i. Has your program ever intentionally tried to recruit young fathers? When? Why?
 - ii. *If program stopped intentionally recruiting young fathers*: Why did the program stop?
 - iii. Why do you think you serve a higher proportion of young fathers than many other RF programs?
6. Now I'd like to learn about your staffing structure. Currently, how many facilitators, case managers, and recruiters work for your program?
 - a. What other key staff that help implement the program or services? How many of the staff are full time?
 - b. What characteristics or skills do you look for when hiring recruiters, especially in terms of being able to successfully engage young fathers?
 - c. What characteristics or skills do you look for when hiring facilitators, especially in terms of being able to successfully engage young fathers?
 - d. How relatable do you think young fathers find program staff (such as facilitators, case managers, or recruiters)? Why do you think young fathers can (or cannot) relate to the staff? Is it harder for staff to connect with young fathers, compared to older fathers, easier, or about the same?
 - e. Please describe someone who you think is particularly skilled at connecting to young fathers in the program.

Recruitment

Now we would like to turn to some questions on how fathers, particularly young fathers, are recruited.

7. How would you describe your program's approach to recruiting fathers? (*Probe*: What staff are involved? Where do you recruit most often?)
 - a. Can you describe some of your key partners or networks that you/your program work(s) with to recruit fathers into the program?
 - i. Which referral partnerships or networks have been most helpful with reaching young fathers specifically?
 - b. Do you do on-the-ground or street outreach? Why or why not?
 - ii. Have you found this approach to be useful in reaching young fathers? Why or why not?
 - c. Do you have a formal approach for word-of-mouth referrals? (For example, are former graduates of the program involved with recruitment? If so, how?)
 - i. Is this something you've tried with young fathers specifically? If yes, has this been successful? If no, what has kept you from trying this strategy?
 - d. Do you currently use social media for recruitment? If so, can you tell me more about how? Which platforms do you use? How do you know if your social media efforts are successful?

- i. How well do you reach young fathers through social media?
- 8. Of those strategies we just talked about—referrals by other organizations, street outreach, word of mouth, social media—which has been your most successful recruitment strategy or strategies in reaching young fathers? (*Probe*: How do you think young fathers typically learn about your program?)
 - a. Why do you think those strategies have been successful in reaching young fathers?
- 9. What would you say is your biggest recruitment challenge overall?
 - a. What types of strategies do you use to overcome this challenge?
 - b. What is your biggest challenge in recruiting young fathers?
- 10. What recruitment strategies, if any, have you tried in the past that have been less successful in recruiting young fathers?
 - a. Why do you think those strategies were less successful for reaching young fathers?
- 11. What are the major differences between recruiting younger fathers and older fathers?
- 12. Do you have any recommendations or advice for other fatherhood programs about recruiting young fathers into the program?

Retention/Program participation

Let's turn to how you/your program keep(s) fathers engaged in the program, particularly young fathers.

- 13. What key skills or benefits do you think young fathers get from participating in:
 - a. The primary workshop?
 - c. Case management?
 - d. Employment services?
 - e. Do you think younger fathers benefit differently from older fathers who participate in these services? How so?
- 14. Do you think that young fathers have different motivations to continue to participate in services compared to older fathers? Why or why not? (*Probes*: Why do they continue attending?)
- 15. For fathers who do participate in services, what aspect of the program do you believe young fathers find most valuable? Is this the same or different than for older fathers?
- 16. Do you think it's harder to retain young fathers in program services or about the same as older fathers? *If retention is more challenging*, why do you think that?
 - a. Are there particular aspects of the program where this is more difficult than others? (For example, primary workshop, case management, employment services, etc.)
 - b. What do you think prevents young fathers from staying engaged in the program?

For these next few questions, please think specifically about the workshop classes.

17. Do you use a cohort model, for example, do fathers start the workshops at the same time and progress through the sessions at the same time with the same group of fathers or do they drop-in to different sessions?
 - a. Do you have workshops just for young fathers or do all workshops have mixed ages? Why or why not? *If all ages:* What are the advantages and disadvantages to serving fathers of all ages together? Have you considered having age-specific groups? Why or why not?
18. What curriculum or curricula do you use for your workshops?
 - a. Did your program purchase or develop this curriculum?
 - b. How long has the program used it?
 - c. Has the program adapted the curriculum in any way for young fathers? If so, how?
19. What strategies do you use to encourage fathers to attend the first workshop session? (*If examples are needed:* Such as, offering transportation, participation milestone payments). How effective are these efforts at encouraging young fathers to participate? Which strategies are the most effective?
20. Do you use any other strategies to encourage fathers to keep attending or make-up content?
21. What is your workshop retention like overall?
 - a. Are there common points in the program where fathers are more likely to drop out? (Probe: Are these points the same or different for younger fathers?).
 - b. What do you struggle with the most when it comes to program attendance and retention?
22. What do you see as the most common barrier for young fathers in attending and then completing the primary workshop?
 - a. What do you think would help young fathers overcome this barrier? What do you think keeps young fathers engaged in the workshop? (For example, rapport with staff, rapport with other participants, the content or skills they learn.)
 - i. *Probe:* Do you think this is different for older fathers? Why or why not?

So now, thinking again about the program overall...

23. What changes, if any, would you make to your program if you were going to exclusively serve younger fathers?
24. Do you have any recommendations or advice for fatherhood programs about keeping young fathers engaged in the program?

C. Wrap Up

Those are all the questions that we have today. Is there anything else that you would like to add or clarify?

Thank you so much for your time!

Facilitator Interview Protocol

A. Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. Today we would like to talk about your experience working with young fathers at **{Program Name}**. In this project, the Administration for Children and Families has contracted Mathematica to better understand how programs recruit and engage young fathers, who we are defining as fathers younger than 30. We know that RF programs often find it challenging to recruit and engage young fathers in services even though many young fathers could benefit from them. We would like to identify some strategies or lessons learned about working with young fathers that we could share with other programs.

[Share consent form and review each section of the form]

Do you consent to participate in this interview?

{Notetaker first name} will be taking notes during our discussion today. If it is okay with you, we would also like to audio record our discussion. Only members of our research team will have access to this recording, and we will destroy it after we complete our study. The recording will only be used to aid our note taking and check that we have correctly described your feedback. No one from your organization will hear this recording.

May we record this discussion?

[MODERATOR: START THE RECORDING]

We have grouped the questions into three overarching topics to help us organize our discussion. First, we would like to learn more about your program and services. Next, we want to know more about recruiting younger fathers. Finally, we would like to learn more about how to keep young fathers engaged with the program.

B. Information Gathering

Any questions before we get started?

1. To start off, please state your title, a brief description of your responsibilities, and how long you have worked at [program].

Program context

2. Let's start by discussing a typical young father that participates in the program. How would you describe them? *Probes:* How old are they? Are they typically with the biological mother of their child? Are they typically first-time fathers?
 - a. How are younger fathers that enroll different than older fathers, other than their age?
 - b. Are there differences between fathers in their teens and early twenties compared to fathers in their late twenties? *If so*, what are they?
3. Can you please briefly describe the workshops, such as the goals, how they are structured, the topics and skills covered?
 - a. (*Probe details on the primary workshop:* How often are the workshop sessions and how long does each session last? Have you been offering any of your workshops virtually or are they all in person? For how many weeks does a workshop series typically run?)

4. For your primary workshop, do you use a cohort model, for example, do fathers start the workshops at the same time and progress through the sessions at the same time with the same group of fathers or do they drop-in to different sessions?
 - a. Do you have workshops just for young fathers or do all workshops have mixed ages? Why or why not?
 - b. *If all ages*: What are the advantages and disadvantages to serving fathers of all ages together? Have you considered having age-specific groups? Why or why not?
 - c. About how many fathers attend a typical workshop session, on average? How many of these fathers are young fathers?
 - i. Would you say that young fathers attend more, less, or about the same number of sessions as other fathers? *If more or less*: Why do you think that is?
5. What curriculum or curricula do you use for your workshops?
 - a. What do you like most about that curriculum/curricula?
 - b. Has the program adapted the curriculum in any way for young fathers? If so, how?
6. Did you receive any training on working with young fathers? If so, what was it?
 - ii. *[Even if not directly about young fathers]* Have you received any training that you have found particularly useful for working with young fathers? Describe how this training was useful.
 - a. Would you like to receive more training on working with young fathers? What types of topics or skills would you like covered in that training?
7. How well are you able to connect with the younger fathers in the program?
 - a. Do you think it is harder, easier, or about the same as other fathers?
8. Do you have any recommendations or advice to give other programs similar to yours of how to improve the overall program experience for young fathers?

Recruitment and retention

Now we would like to turn to some questions on how fathers, particularly young fathers, are recruited and engaged in the program.

9. What assumptions do you think young fathers typically make about your program?
 - a. Why do you think they have those assumptions when they first learn about the program?
10. What do you find to be the primary motivation for young fathers to enroll?
11. What key skills or benefits do you think young fathers get from participating in:
 - a. The primary workshop?
 - b. Case management?
 - c. Employment services?
 - d. Do you think younger fathers benefit differently from older fathers who participate in these services?
12. Do you think it's harder to retain young fathers in program services or about the same as older fathers? If retention is more challenging, why do you think that?

- a. Are there particular aspects of the program where this is more difficult than others? (For example, primary workshop, case management, employment services, etc.)
- b. What do you think prevents young fathers from staying engaged in the program?

For these next few questions, please think specifically about the workshop classes.

- 13. What strategies do you use to encourage fathers to attend the first workshop session? (*If examples are needed:* Such as, offering transportation, participation milestone payments)
 - a. Who typically conducts those efforts?
 - b. How effective are these efforts at encouraging young fathers to participate? Which strategies are the most effective?
 - c. Do you use any other strategies to encourage fathers to keep attending or make-up content?
- 14. What is your workshop retention like overall?
 - a. Are there common points in the program where fathers are more likely to drop out? (*Probe:* Are these points the same or different for younger fathers?)
 - b. Do you think that young fathers have different motivations to continue to participate in workshops compared to older fathers? Why or why not? (*Probes:* Why do they continue attending?)
 - c. What do you struggle with the most when it comes to program attendance and retention?
- 15. What do you see as the most common barrier for young fathers in attending and then completing the primary workshop?
 - a. What do you think would help young fathers overcome this barrier?
- 16. What skills or workshop content/topics do you think young fathers are particularly good at or enjoy the most? (For example, being a nurturing father, self-sufficiency, maintaining a co-parenting relationship, healthy romantic relationships, identity as a father). Is this the same or different as older fathers?
- 17. What skills or workshop content/topics do you think younger fathers struggle with the most? (For example, parenting, self-sufficiency, co-parenting, romantic relationships, identity as a father). Is this the same or different as older fathers?
 - a. *Probe:* What strategies have you found to be successful in guiding young fathers through that particular aspect of the program?
- 18. Do you tailor any of the program content based on the age of the fathers attending?
 - a. Are there particular lessons or topics that young fathers have different reactions to or have trouble relating to compared to older fathers? Why do you think they react that way? (*Probe:* Can you share a specific example?)
 - b. What is the best advice you have for other fatherhood programs on how you could adapt curriculum content and/or delivery to be more interesting or appealing for young fathers?
- 19. What do you think keeps young fathers engaged in the workshop? (For example, rapport with staff, rapport with other participants, the content or skills they learn)
 - a. *Probe:* Do you think this is different for older fathers? Why or why not?
- 20. How, if at all, do you help young fathers open up or speak in the workshops if they are hesitant at first?

- a. Is getting young fathers to open up during the workshop easier, harder, or about the same as older fathers?
- 21. What are the interactions typically like between younger fathers and older fathers who are participating in the program?
 - a. Do you think it changes the dynamic of the workshop to have younger fathers and older fathers attending together? Why or why not?
 - i. Can you think of an example of a past cohort where this was/was not the case?
 - b. Do older fathers offer advice or “life lessons” to the younger fathers? How do young fathers tend to react to that?
 - c. What are the interactions like amongst the younger fathers in the program?

So now, thinking again about the program overall...

- 22. What changes, if any, would you make to your program if you were going to exclusively serve younger fathers?
- 23. Do you have any recommendations or advice for fatherhood programs about keeping young fathers engaged in the program?

C. Wrap Up

Those are all the questions that we have today. Is there anything else that you would like to add or clarify?

Thank you so much for your time!

Recruiter Interview Protocol

A. Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. Today we would like to talk about your experience working with young fathers at {Program Name}. In this project, the Administration for Children and Families has contracted Mathematica to better understand how programs recruit and engage young fathers, who we are defining as fathers younger than 30. We know that RF programs often find it challenging to recruit and engage young fathers in services even though many young fathers could benefit from them. We would like to identify some strategies or lessons learned about working with young fathers that we could share with other programs.

[Share copy of consent form and review each section]

Do you consent to participate in this interview?

{Notetaker first name} will be taking notes during our discussion today. If it is okay with you, we would also like to audio record our discussion. Only members of our research team will have access to this recording, and we will destroy it after we complete our study. The recording will only be used to aid our note taking and check that we have correctly described your feedback. No one from your organization will hear this recording.

May we record this discussion?

[MODERATOR: START THE RECORDING]

We have grouped the questions into three overarching topics to help us organize our discussion. First, we would like to learn more about your program and services. Next, we want to know more about recruiting younger fathers. Finally, we would like to learn more about how to keep young fathers engaged with the program.

B. Information Gathering

Any questions before we get started?

1. To start off, can you tell us about your involvement with this program?

Program context

2. Can you please briefly describe your program, such as the goals of your program and the services you offer, as well as other important characteristics?
3. Does your program specifically aim to serve young fathers?
 - a. *If yes:* How does your program approach that?
 - b. *If not:* Why do you think you serve a higher proportion of young fathers than many other RF programs?
4. How would you describe the typical “young father” that participates in your program? *Probes:* How old are they? Are they typically with the biological mother of their child? Are they typically first-time fathers?
 - a. How are younger fathers that enroll different than older fathers, other than their age?
 - b. Are there differences between fathers in their teens and early twenties compared to fathers in their late twenties? *If so*, what are they?

Recruitment

Now we would like to turn to some questions on your program's recruitment practices.

5. How would you describe your [your program's] approach to recruiting fathers? (*Probe*: Where do you recruit most often?)
 - a. What are some of your key partners or networks that you/your program work(s) with to recruit fathers into the program?
 - i. Which referral partnerships or networks have been most helpful with reaching young fathers specifically?
 - b. Do you do on-the-ground or street outreach? Why or why not?
 - i. Have you found this approach to be useful in reaching young fathers? Why or why not?
 - c. Do you have a formal approach for word-of-mouth referrals? (For example, are former graduates of the program involved with recruitment? If so, how?)
 - i. Is this something you've tried with young fathers specifically? *If yes*, has this been successful? *If no*, what has kept you from trying this strategy?
 - d. Do you currently use social media for recruitment? If so, can you tell me more about how? Which platforms do you use? How do you know if your social media efforts are successful?
 - i. How well do you reach young fathers through social media?
6. Of those strategies we just talked about—referrals by other organizations/partnerships, street outreach, word of mouth, social media—which has been your most successful recruitment strategy or strategies in reaching young fathers? (*Probe*: How do you think young fathers typically learn about your program?)
 - a. Why do you think those strategies have been successful in reaching young fathers?
7. What would you say is your biggest challenge recruiting fathers in general?
 - a. What types of strategies do you use to overcome this challenge?
 - b. What is your biggest challenge in recruiting young fathers?
8. What recruitment strategies, if any, have you tried in the past that have been less successful in recruiting young fathers?
 - a. Why do you think those strategies were less successful for reaching young fathers?
9. What are the major differences between recruiting younger fathers and older fathers?
 - a. *Probe*: How does your recruitment strategy differ for younger fathers compared to older fathers?
 - b. *Probe*: Can you give me an example of how you might tailor the recruitment strategy based on a father's age?
10. Did you receive any training on working with young fathers? If so, what was it?
11. Would you like to receive more training on working with young fathers? What types of topics or skills would you like covered in that training?
12. How prepared do you feel to recruit young fathers?
13. How well are you able to connect with the younger fathers in the program?
 - a. Do you think it is harder, easier, or about the same as other fathers?

14. What assumptions do you think young fathers typically make about your program?
 - a. Why do you think they have those assumptions when they first learn about the program?
15. What do you find to be the primary motivation for young fathers to enroll? What aspects of the program are they most interested in?
16. What have you found to be the most substantial barrier to enrollment for younger fathers? What is the most substantial barrier to enrollment for older fathers?
 - a. *Probe:* Is there a common reason that younger fathers might give as to why they don't want to participate in the program?
17. What is the best advice you have for other fatherhood programs on how to recruit young fathers?

C. Wrap Up

Those are all the questions that we have today. Is there anything else that you would like to add or clarify?

Thank you so much for your time!

FRAMING Research Young Fathers Focus Group Protocol

I. Study introduction and consent

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. My name is _____, and my colleague is _____. We are from a company called Mathematica. We do not work for the [RF Program]. We are here to learn about your experiences with [RF Program] to improve these types of programs for fathers like you.

[NOTETAKER: Consent forms are handed out as people arrive and take their seats. At this point, double check that everyone has a copy of the consent form.]

The information I am about to share is also summarized in the consent form that we gave to you. There is some additional information of the form, including who you can contact if you have any questions or concerns about the study.

We are here on behalf of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation or OPRE, which is part of the Administration for Children and Families within the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. OPRE funds a research project called the FRAMING Research project, which examines existing and ongoing research on healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programs and related fields. We are speaking with you all today to hear more about your thoughts and experiences around participating in a responsible fatherhood program.

The focus group will last up to 60 minutes. During that time, the facilitator will ask you to talk about your experiences related to [PROGRAM NAME]. The facilitator will not ask you to share anything you do not want to share. We will ask to record the discussion so we can accurately capture what you say. If you do not agree to the recording, you can still participate, and we will not record it, but we have someone who will take notes. Anything you say during the discussions will remain private, meaning we will not use your name in our reports or associate your name with anything you say. We ask that you respect others' privacy by not sharing any information outside of the focus group.

There are no known risks to participating in the focus group. There may be questions you may feel are too personal, but you do not have to respond to any question that you are uncomfortable answering.

We will limit the amount of information we collect to only what is needed to answer our research questions. Only members of the research team will have access to the recordings. Members of the research team will save the recordings, transcribed notes, and participant lists in secure locations with access restricted to the team members. We will destroy the recording and the transcribed notes at the end of the study. All members of the research team have signed confidentiality agreements and completed training in data security and privacy to protect human subjects.

You will receive a \$100 gift card to offset any costs related to participation. Your participation in the focus group is voluntary and you may leave the focus group at any time or refuse to answer any specific questions, and you will still receive the \$100 gift card. There are no penalties or consequences for deciding not to participate.

You can choose not to participate in the discussion and there will be no consequences if you choose not to participate. You can also choose not to answer a question if you wish. Your responses will not affect any services or benefits you or your family members receive through any programs.

Does anyone have questions about the information we just discussed?

If you agree to take part in today's discussion, please let me know verbally that you agree. If you do not want to participate, you are free to leave.

[Ensure that all fathers verbally agree before beginning]

II. Ground rules

We value the information you share with us. To make this a safe space, I am asking that we all make the following commitments to each other.

- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. We are interested in learning everyone's thoughts and opinions, and to learn from your experiences. Just say exactly what you think, whether it's positive or negative. This will be an informal discussion.
- It's really important for everyone to speak up and to give everyone a chance to talk. We want all of you to share your thoughts and to build on what others are saying, but please let one person talk at a time so we can understand what each person is saying. We may remind you of this as we are talking. And if we have not heard your opinion in a while or we really want to know what you think about a particular question, we may ask you what you think.
- We have many topics to cover during the discussion. I might change the subject or move us ahead from time to time. If I interrupt you, it's not personal. I just want to be sure we hear your views on everything on our list.
- There will be no formal break during the discussion. Please get up or use the restroom if you need to.
- We ask that you keep this discussion private, and do not share what is said here with anyone outside this room. Use first names only to identify yourself or others. That said, we cannot control what people say or do outside of this group so do not share anything you don't want others to hear.

Do you have any questions or suggestions before we get started?

We would also like to audio record today's discussion. Do you all agree to be recorded? If you want to say anything that you do not want recorded, please let me know, and I will pause the recorder. Or if you prefer that we do not record any of our discussion today, we will just take notes.

III. Discussion Guide

A. Introductions

First, let's start by going around the room to get to know each other. Please introduce yourselves by stating:

- Just your first name (please no last names). Or you can provide a pseudonym if you do not want to share your real name.
- If you're comfortable sharing, how many children do you have and how old you were when you first became a father?

[MODERATOR: TURN ON THE RECORDER]

B. Enrollment in RF programs

Let's talk about how and when you became involved with [RF Program], and what getting into the program was like for you.

1. How did you first hear about [RF Program]? (*Probes:* When did you hear about it? Who told you about it? Did you find the program on your own?)
2. Why did you decide to enroll? (*Probes:* Was it a choice or were you mandated? What about the program interested you? What did you expect or hope to get out of the program?)
3. Did you have any concerns about enrolling in the program? If yes, what were they?
 - a. Did anything help to lessen your concerns? If so, what?
 - b. What convinced you to participate despite those concerns?
4. What are the best ways for programs to reach fathers like you to tell them about the program? (For example, social media, going to places in the community.)
 - a. Any ways the programs should not reach out to young fathers?
5. Do you think young fathers are more likely to enroll if they hear about the program from another man? From someone a similar age? From someone who has been in the program before? What other characteristics are important?

A. Experience with and participation in services

Now, let's talk about your participation in services at [RF Program].

1. How would you describe what [RF Program] is like to other fathers who are like you?
 - a. Would that description make you want to participate if you were learning about this program for the first time?
2. What has been the biggest benefit in participating in [RF Program]?
 - a. *If they describe a skill:* Can you give me an example of a time where you were able to use that skill in your everyday life?
 - b. *If they describe a service:* Can you give me an example of a time where that service helped you?
 - c. *If they describe a relationship:* Can you give me an example of how that relationship has helped you?
3. Are there topics that are covered or parts of the program or services that have been less helpful or relevant to you? Why or why not?
4. What about the program has made you want to keep coming back? (For example, the relationships with staff, relationships with other fathers, information, incentives). (*Probe:* Has this changed at all while you have been in the program?)
5. What, if anything, has made it difficult for you to come to [RF Program]?
 - a. How, if at all, did the staff help you overcome those challenges?
 - b. When you think about other fathers who might be like you, what difficulties do you think they might face in participating each week?

6. *If program offers mixed age workshops:* What do you think about participating in workshops with fathers of different ages? (*Probes:* What do you like/dislike about it? Would you prefer to be in workshops only with fathers who are close in age to you? Why or why not?)
7. *If program offers workshops to young fathers separately:* What do you think about participating in workshops with young fathers instead of fathers of different ages? (*Probes:* What do you like/dislike about it? Would you prefer to be in workshops with fathers of all ages? Why or why not?)
8. *If program uses cohort model:* What do you think about participating in workshops with the same group of fathers each session? (*Probes:* What do you like/dislike about it? Would you prefer to choose which workshop you go to every week instead? Why or why not?)
1. *If program uses drop-in model:* What do you think about participating in workshops with a different group of fathers every time? (*Probes:* What do you like/dislike about it? Would you prefer to choose which workshop with the same group of dads every week? Why or why not?)
9. Thinking back to when you first enrolled in the program and what you hoped or expected to get out of the program, how did the program meet those expectations? Did the program end up being different than what you were expecting?
10. What else could [RF Program] staff do to make it easier for you or other fathers like you to participate in the services?

B. Participant needs and program satisfaction

Let's keep thinking about your participation in the [RF Program] workshop classes and the services they provide as a whole.

1. Overall, how well do you think [RF Program] services meet your needs? (*Probe:* How has this changed over time, if at all?)
2. Some people have different needs at different points in their life. How well has your participation in [RF Program] services helped you with:
 - a. Your parenting skills?
 - b. Your job or employment skills?
 - c. Your co-parenting relationship?
 - d. Your communication skills?
 - e. Helping you to get in touch with other services or resources that you need?
 - f. Anything else?(*Probe:* Can you give any specific examples?)
3. What else could the [RF Program] do to help you with:
 - a. Your parenting skills?
 - b. Your job or employment skills?
 - c. Your co-parenting relationship skills?
 - d. Your communication skills?
 - e. Helping you to get in touch with other services or resources that you need?

- f. Anything else?
- 4. What do you think [RF program] staff are doing well? (*Probes*: Facilitators, case managers, recruiters) What do you think they could improve?
- 5. What changes would you make to [RF Program] to make it more appealing to you or other fathers who are a similar age as you?

C. Closing questions and wrap up

We covered a lot today and are done with the questions about your experiences with the [RF Program]. Does anyone have a final question or comment they'd like to share before we continue?

That concludes our questions for today. Thank you again for sharing your experiences and taking time to answer our questions! Your insights will really help others learn from your experiences. We also appreciate you taking the time to provide your feedback about this conversation process.

In appreciation for participating in this group, here is your \$100 gift card and paper with our contact information.

[MODERATOR: TURN OFF RECORDER]

[MODERATOR: Have each participant sign the form acknowledging gift card receipt and give them the gift card]

Observation details

Site/program:	Observer(s):	Date of observation:
Workshop session # or title (if known):	Length of workshop/observation:	Was the workshop delivered in: English Spanish

Workshop details

About how many fathers were in attendance? <i>Wait a few minutes into the session before counting in case anyone is late.</i>	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> Fathers in attendance <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> Fathers in their teens or early twenties (your best guess is fine) <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> Fathers in their mid- to late-twenties (your best guess is fine)
Which best describes the room set up?	Participants all facing the front of the room in rows Participants facing each other in small groups or pods Participants in a U shape facing the front of the room Participants sitting in a circle facing each other Other, specify:
Did the session include: <i>Mark all that apply</i>	Lecture Large group discussion (all participants) Small group discussion (participants divided into groups) Activity
Approximately how many minutes were spent on each activity?	<input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> minutes of lecture <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> minutes of large group discussion <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> minutes of small group discussion <input type="text"/> <input type="text"/> minutes of activity
Briefly describe the interactions occurring (1) between fathers and (2) between fathers and the facilitator. <i>Some things to consider: Do the interactions seem positive or supportive? Are the interactions respectful? Is there tension? Do the interactions seem awkward?</i>	

Workshop details

Briefly describe the topics covered during the workshop.

Is the content tailored to young fathers? Provide examples.

Note specific examples the facilitator used that would be particularly relevant to a young father?

What types of resources or media are being used to present or reinforce content?

Mark all that apply

PowerPoint slides
Handouts
Workbooks
Other, specify:

Which, if any, resources particularly resonated with the fathers (specifically note younger fathers' reactions). Note examples that led you to believe these resources resonated.

Describe the level of engagement from participants. Do they seem to find the material interesting or useful? What types of questions, if any, are they asking about the content?

Note whether the level of engagement varies by age group.

Workshop details

Describe if and how fathers expressed any needs during the session. Note if younger fathers are raising concerns/needs.

For example, help with child support services, specific parenting tips, help with job applications, etc.

Describe any services that were mentioned during the session that fathers seemed particularly interested in (note if younger fathers were expressing interest).

Additional context or notes about the session:

Post-workshop reflections

How would you describe the overall tone of the workshop session?

Did you notice anything different about the younger fathers and their engagement and/or participation compared to the older fathers?

Answer only if a mixed-age cohort.

Post-workshop reflections

Describe if and how the facilitator used any techniques or practices that were particularly effective in encouraging engagement or participation? Note if these particularly resonated with the younger fathers.

What evidence did you observe of fathers feeling heard, at-ease or understood by the facilitator(s) or fellow participants?

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