



FATHERHOOD

Ongoing Research and Program Evaluation Efforts
in the Administration for Children and Families



OPRE Report #2019-04

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services promotes the economic and social well-being of families, children, individuals, and communities. Many ACF programs interact with and serve fathers in an effort to promote economic self-sufficiency and social well-being for them and their families. Across ACF, we are implementing rigorous research and evaluation projects to better understand how to serve fathers and their families.

This brief describes ongoing research and evaluation projects related to 1) ACF's Responsible Fatherhood grant program, 2) non-custodial parents, and 3) fathers and fatherhood more broadly. It also describes some of ACF's past research and evaluation efforts related to fatherhood.

Research related to the Responsible Fatherhood Grant Program

Since 2006, Congress has authorized dedicated funding to promote responsible fatherhood. The funds are awarded by ACF's Office of Family Assistance (OFA) to grantees who deliver program services in three areas: healthy marriage and couple relationships, responsible parenting, and economic stability. OFA has awarded three cohorts of grants to date (in 2006, 2011, and 2015). ACF's Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), in collaboration with OFA, oversees numerous research and evaluation projects related to the Responsible Fatherhood grant program.

[Building Bridges and Bonds \(B3\)](#) project is partnering with six fatherhood programs to conduct rigorous evaluations of innovative, evidence-informed approaches to address two of the three core components of

responsible fatherhood programs: parenting, and economic stability. B3 is also testing a smartphone-based mobile application designed to improve fathers' program attendance and parenting involvement.

A sub-study of B3 focuses on understanding challenges to family reintegration for parents after incarceration. The sub-study examines current approaches being implemented by family strengthening programs to promote reintegration and functioning among families affected by parental incarceration.

The [Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads \(CHaRMED\)](#) project aims to better understand how fatherhood programs currently support healthy marriages/relationships and coparenting and examine how their approaches align with the needs of the fathers in their target populations. The study will examine the nature of fathers' relationships, review the services that programs currently provide to support healthy marriages/relationships and coparenting, solicit fathers' opinions about those services, identify gaps in services, and outline recommendations for addressing these gaps.

The [Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives: A Continuous Quality Improvement Approach in the Child Welfare System](#) project aims to address the longstanding challenge of engaging fathers and paternal relatives of children involved in the child welfare system. Father engagement is associated with important child welfare outcomes, including reduced likelihood of entry into foster care, shorter time spent in foster care, and increased rates of reunification. Despite the potential for positive impacts of father engagement systematic reviews of strategies to engage fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare cases reveal little empirical evidence to guide practice. This project attempts to fill this gap. The project will review the small body of existing evidence in the areas of father and paternal relative engagement in child welfare, identify key touchpoints for engagement, and identify which collaborative continuous learning processes currently utilized in child welfare settings could be used in this project. This work will inform a pilot study to test high-priority father and paternal relative engagement strategies using a collaborative continuous learning process.

The [Fatherhood and Marriage Local Evaluation and Cross-Site \(FaMLE Cross Site\)](#) project provides performance measure and evaluation support for the third cohort (2015-2020) of OFA's Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) grantees. Specifically, the project designed and maintains a management information system called nFORM (Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management) with HMRF-specific performance measures, which all grantees use. The project also supports

a subset of grantees and their independent evaluators as they conduct grantee-specific impact or descriptive evaluations of their programs. The project analyzes how grantees designed and implemented their programs, and the reported outcomes for participants in the programs. Taken together, these activities further ACF's understanding of HMRF programming, while supporting grantees as they use data to better understand their own programming successes and challenges.

The [Fatherhood Research and Practice Network \(FRPN\)](#) supports collaboration among fatherhood researchers and practitioners to build their capacity to conduct rigorous research on practice-relevant issues. FRPN also provides opportunities for investigators across multiple disciplines to engage in dialogue on fatherhood research and broadly disseminates research findings about fathers and fatherhood programs.

Through the [Family Strengthening Scholars](#) grant program, OPRE awards grants to support dissertation research that can inform HMRF policy and practice. The grant program is designed to build research capacity in the HMRF field and to focus research on questions that have direct implications for HMRF decision-making and program administration.

The [Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research \(FRAMING Research\)](#) project supports the OFA HMRF learning agenda. The project examines research and evaluation related to HMRF programming. Through expert consultation, knowledge mapping, and an iterative literature review, FRAMING Research explores completed and ongoing HMRF research to identify gaps for future research relevant to HMRF programs. The FRAMING Research project will also consider research from relevant fields, such as implementation science and their implications for HMRF programming.

The [Parents and Children Together \(PACT\) Evaluation](#) is a multi-component study of a subset of ACF's Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grantees. Six grantees were involved in the rigorous impact and process studies, including four responsible fatherhood grantees and two healthy marriage grantees. Findings showed that the [responsible fatherhood programs in PACT](#) improved fathers' parenting, specifically their self-reported nurturing behavior and engagement in age-appropriate activities with children. They also increased the length of time fathers were continuously employed, but did not affect co-parenting or measures of social-emotional and mental wellbeing among fathers. The [healthy marriage programs in PACT](#) improved measures of couples' relationship quality and increased the likelihood that couples were married at the one-year follow-up. The PACT healthy marriage programs also improved couples'

coparenting relationships, but had limited success in improving economic outcomes of participants.

PACT also included four sub-studies, including: a series of three annual in-depth, in-person interviews with selected fathers participating in the responsible fatherhood study programs; a study of the program strategies and adaptations used by selected responsible fatherhood programs serving Hispanic fathers; and an assessment of participants' pathways to achieving outcomes. The fourth PACT sub-study, [Trauma-informed Approaches to Serving Formerly Incarcerated Dads](#) aimed to explore trauma-informed approaches for serving fathers reentering from incarceration and understand how responsible fatherhood grantees could implement a trauma-informed approach in their programming. The project reviewed research and interviewed experts on trauma-informed systems of care and the prevalence of trauma among justice-involved men. The project produced a literature review, practitioner's brief, and webinar to disseminate findings and recommendations.

The [Preventing and Addressing Intimate Violence when Engaging Dads \(PAIVED\)](#) project identifies approaches that fatherhood programs could take to address and contribute to the prevention of intimate partner violence (IPV) among fathers. The project is examining approaches that fatherhood programs are currently taking to address fathers' experiences with or perpetration of IPV, including examining curricula and other materials that programs are using or could use. The project will identify gaps in currently used approaches and materials and synthesize implications for fatherhood programs.

Research related to Non-Custodial Parents

ACF's Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) and OPRE coordinate on a range of research and evaluation projects related to noncustodial parents. OCSE administers grant-funded demonstration projects, waivers, and other research-related partnerships to improve the effectiveness of the child support program, and to produce the best outcomes for children and families. Grants are competitively awarded to state and tribal child support agencies or the government agency of which they are part. OPRE provides support to OCSE in overseeing these demonstration grants, in addition to funding other research and evaluation projects focused on noncustodial parents.

In fall 2017, OPRE launched [Building Evidence on Employment Strategies for Low-Income Families \(BEES\)](#). The project aims to build on and complement current state and federal efforts, efficiently move selected interventions or program models to the next level

of evidence, and ultimately increase the number of evidence-supported interventions for low-income populations seeking employment and economic stability. BEES will assist ACF in building evidence for innovative interventions aimed at supporting low-income individuals and families seeking employment, advances in the labor market, and economic security. In addition, ACF aims to support states in moving toward rigorous evaluations of state-initiated interventions. Within these broad goals, the project will prioritize building evidence specifically related to preventing and addressing behavioral health issues such as opioid dependency, substance abuse, and/or mental health issues that create barriers to employment among TANF participants. The project will also explore programs serving non-custodial parents, reentry populations, and individuals with current or foreseeable disabilities who may be at risk of relying on SSI.

[Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services \(BICS\)](#) is a national demonstration exploring the potential relevance and application of behavioral economics principles to child support services. In 2014, the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) awarded grants to California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, and Washington to develop and test interventions to improve child support outcomes. BICS interventions have addressed a range of child support challenges, including initial payments on newly established child support orders, parent engagement prior to order establishment, and the order review and modification process. OCSE also awarded a grant to Washington State's Division of Child Support to oversee the national evaluation of BICS.

The [Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration \(CSPED\)](#) was designed to increase reliable child support payments among noncustodial parents who were unable to pay their child support by providing them with child support-led employment programs. It operated from 2012 to 2018, enrolling over 10,000 noncustodial parents, 90% of whom were fathers. Eight states were involved (California, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin). CSPED services consisted of case management, work-first employment services, parenting/fatherhood classes, and enhanced child support services. Participants in the demonstration faced significant employment barriers – 70% had a criminal record, 70% had at most a high school education, and 55% were working at the time of enrollment, but their average earnings were below the poverty threshold for a single person. A rigorous evaluation examined the implementation and impacts of CSPED and conducted a benefit-cost analysis. The [interim implementation report](#) was released in 2015, and final reports are expected in 2019.

The [Procedural Justice-Informed Alternatives to Contempt \(PJAC\)](#) demonstration is testing whether incorporating procedural justice principles into child support business practices increases reliable child support payments and increases trust and confidence in the child support agency and its processes. Procedural justice is “the idea that how individuals regard the justice system is tied more to the perceived fairness of the *process* and how they were treated rather than to the perceived fairness of the *outcome*.”¹ Six sites (Arizona; California; Michigan; Ohio for Franklin County;; Ohio for Stark County;; and Virginia,) were awarded grants in 2016 to develop programs that integrate the five key elements of procedural justice into their business practices: Voice and Participation, Neutrality of the Process, Respect, Understanding, and Helpfulness. The goals of the PJAC demonstration are to increase reliable payments, reduce arrears, minimize the need for continued enforcement actions and sanctions, and reduce the inappropriate use of contempt. OCSE also awarded a grant to Georgia’s Department of Human Services to oversee the national evaluation of PJAC. The national evaluation includes an implementation study, a random assignment impact study, and a cost benefit study.

The [Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Services Analysis Execution \(RED-X\)](#) Project (2018 – 2021) builds on the earlier [Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Human Services \(RED\)](#) project. RED investigated how existing work on racial and ethnic disparities could inform more accurate identification and interpretation of ethnic and racial differences in programs administered by ACF. This project laid the groundwork for ACF to more comprehensively assess whether racial and ethnic disparities exist in ACF-administered programs at any stage in the service delivery system, including access to and take-up of human services, the nature and quality of services received, and the outcomes of services.

To help us better understand how racial and ethnic disparities might affect ACF programs, RED completed [a literature review](#) that synthesized existing research on racial and ethnic disparities in the service delivery system of six programs overseen by ACF, including child support services provided under Title IV-D of the Social Security Act (the “Title IV-D program”). This literature review included a conceptual framework for distinguishing racial and ethnic disparities from differences. RED also conducted preliminary data analyses to identify racial and ethnic differences between eligibility and participation within and across four programs overseen by ACF, including the Title IV-D program. Results from the analyses were shared in an internal memo. Finally, RED developed a research design plan for potential future research activities to reliably identify racial and ethnic disparities across the service delivery system in a range of ACF programs and services. The research plan outlines research questions and proposes approaches to addressing those questions, including recommended data sources, analytic strategies and data collection activities.

RED-X will implement RED's research design plan for up to four ACF programs, including potentially the Title IV-D program. To do this, RED-X will use existing program administrative and survey data (including microsimulation models) to identify and analyze racial and ethnic disparities. The goal of this project is to improve ACF program delivery for all racial and ethnic groups.

The [Subsidized and Transitional Employment Demonstration \(STED\)](#) is evaluating the effectiveness of the latest generation of subsidized and transitional employment approaches for low-income populations. The project examines subsidized employment strategies in eight sites designed to address two distinct goals: 1) provide work-based income support for people who are not able to find regular, unsubsidized jobs; and 2) to improve the employability of disadvantaged groups. Each subsidized employment program is being evaluated using a random assignment design. Two sites targeted noncustodial parents: Good Transitions in Atlanta, GA and TransitionsSF in San Francisco, CA. Project descriptions and findings for these two sites can be found in a [30-month final report](#).

Other Work on Fathers and Fatherhood

The [Using Digital Marketing to Increase Participation in the Child Support Program](#) demonstration tests digital marketing approaches to reach parents that could benefit from child support services. Under the demonstration, twelve state and two tribal child support agencies received grant funding in September 2018 to test digital marketing approaches to help inform potential customers of available services, to engage parents to make child support payments, and to encourage child support involvement. The digital marketing demonstration project allows grantees to collect and analyze data on how digital marketing may help child support programs more effectively reach and serve families in their communities. During the two-year project period, grantees will design and test at least three digital marketing interventions using the [Learn Innovate Improve \(LI²\)](#) process. Examples of proposed interventions include launching social media campaigns, internet advertisements, and communicating through various mediums such as text messaging.

The [National Research Center on Hispanic Children and Families](#) generates new knowledge and translates research across three priority areas—poverty reduction and self-sufficiency, healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood, and early care and education—to inform ACF programs and policies in order to better serve Hispanic children and families. Initiated in 2013, the Center also aims to build capacity with the research, policy, and practice communities. The Center has developed a range of publications related to fatherhood, including a brief describing U.S. Latino fathers based

on nationally representative data, a guide to healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programs for Hispanic couples and families, and a brief on family structure and family formation among low-income Hispanics in the U.S.

Past Projects

The [Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency \(BIAS\)](#) project was the first major opportunity to apply a behavioral economics lens to programs that serve poor and vulnerable families in the United States. BIAS worked with human services programs to design and test behaviorally-informed interventions to program challenges, with an ultimate goal of learning how behavioral insights can be used to improve the well-being of low-income children and families. BIAS designed and tested interventions related to child support in four sites:

- BIAS worked with the Texas Office of the Attorney General Child Support Division on [increasing the number of incarcerated noncustodial parents who apply for child support order modifications](#). The behaviorally-informed intervention produced a highly statistically significant and policy-relevant impact at a relatively low cost and demonstrated the promise of applying behavioral economics to improve ACF program implementation and outcomes.
- BIAS worked with the Franklin County, Ohio Child Support Enforcement Agency to implement two behaviorally-informed interventions design to [increase child support payments from noncustodial parents who do not have income withholding and need to take action each month to make a payment](#). Results from the two interventions show that reminders can be an important tool for influencing people's actions.
- BIAS worked with the Cuyahoga County, Ohio Office of Child Support Services to implement four behaviorally-informed interventions intended to [increase the percentage of parents who made child support payments and the dollar amount of collections per parent](#). The findings demonstrate that low-cost, low-effort behavioral interventions can improve child support outcomes, but that more intensive interventions may be needed to increase overall child support collection amounts.
- BIAS worked with the Washington State Division of Child Support on [increasing the number of incarcerated noncustodial parents who apply for child support order modifications](#). The behaviorally-informed intervention increased the percentage of parents who requested a modification, as well as increased the percentage of parents who actually received a modification to their child support order.

The [Ex-Prisoner Reentry Strategies](#) project was an implementation study examining how Responsible Fatherhood programs serve fathers soon-to-be released and recently released from incarceration. The study followed six grantees in the second cohort of OFA's HMRF grants (2011-2015) and documented program operations, recruitment strategies, the experiences of staff and participants, and the types of activities and services offered to participants and their families. The programs began serving fathers while they were incarcerated and continued to serve them after release, with the goals of stabilizing the fathers and their families, moving the fathers towards self-sufficiency, and reducing recidivism. The study released [interim](#) and [final implementation](#) reports, as well as a series of briefs on the activities offered by programs related to [responsible parenting](#), [healthy marriage](#), and [economic stability](#).

The [Fathers and Home Visiting](#) project was an exploratory study that used qualitative methods to learn about father engagement and fathers' experiences in five purposively selected home visiting programs. The project published a [report and accompanying brief](#) on the approaches that home visiting programs use to engage fathers, the challenges they face, the strategies they use to overcome these challenges, and benefits of participating from the perspective of fathers and program staff. The findings offer lessons about the implementation of father engagement strategies that have important policy and practical implications for the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting program, as well as HMRF programs nationwide.

[Parenting Time Opportunities for Children in the Child Support Program \(PTOC\)](#) was an OCSE-funded pilot program to develop, implement, and evaluate procedures to establish parenting time orders along with new child support orders. The pilot program ran from 2012-2017 in five sites (Miami-Dade County, FL; Monroe County, IN; Fairfield County, OH; San Diego County, CA; and the state of Oregon). The goal of the project was to learn more about how the child support program can safely and effectively give families opportunities to establish parenting time orders, thereby improving child support outcomes and child well-being overall. Each site contracted with an independent evaluator to document implementation lessons and track program outcomes.

The five sites successfully implemented parenting processes to child support order establishment, with relatively small grant amounts, while also implementing domestic violence safeguards in collaboration with state and local domestic violence experts. Some sites identified funding to continue offering parenting time orders after their grant funding ended. Several essential elements for successful implementation were identified, including training child support staff on explaining parenting time orders and options, and creating an agency environment where parenting time orders were seen as the norm

rather than a special or extra service. Also essential was providing a specific menu of parenting order options with simple, easy to understand descriptions of those options, and giving parents educational materials explaining parenting time order options and processes.

Through the [Secondary Data Analyses of Strengthening Families Datasets Grants](#), OPRE awarded eight cooperative agreements in 2014 to conduct secondary data analysis of archived data collected during the ACF-funded [Building Strong Families \(BSF\)](#), [Supporting Healthy Marriage \(SHM\)](#), and [Community Healthy Marriage Initiative \(CMHI\)](#) evaluations. Examples of the topics grantees focused on include: marriage and economic factors; relationship education and relationship factors, such as quality; relationship education and child well-being; and race/ethnicity and relationship education outcomes.

The [Strengthening Families Curriculum Resource Guide](#) provides information about the content and select features of curricula commonly used by grantees in the first and second cohorts of the HMRF grant program (2006-2011 and 2011-2015, respectively). The Guide provides information on each curriculum such as who it is intended to reach, the topics covered, and what organizations need to implement it. Additionally, users can generate a side-by-side comparison of curricula to facilitate the selection of a curriculum that best fits a user's needs.

About Us

The [Administration for Children & Families \(ACF\)](#) is a division of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. ACF promotes the economic and social well-being of families, children, individuals, and communities. ACF programs aim to:

- Empower families and individuals to increase their economic independence and productivity;
- Encourage strong, healthy, supportive communities that have a positive impact on quality of life and the development of children;
- Create partnerships with front-line service providers, states, localities, and tribal communities to identify and implement solutions that transcend traditional program boundaries;
- Improve access to services through planning, reform, and integration; and
- Address the needs, strengths, and abilities of vulnerable populations including people with developmental disabilities, refugees, and migrants.

The federal [Office of Child Support Enforcement \(OCSE\)](#) partners with federal, state, tribal, and local governments and others to promote parental responsibility so that children receive reliable support from both of their parents as they grow to adulthood. OCSE helps child support agencies in the states and tribes develop, manage, and operate their programs effectively and according to federal law.

- Financially support child support program operations
- Provide grants for state Access and Visitation programs
- Provide policy guidance and technical help
- Conduct audits and educational programs
- Support research and provide grants for program improvement
- Operate the Federal Parent Locator Service and the National Directory of New Hires
- Work with states to provide limited enforcement services, such as federal tax refund intercepts and passport denials
- Work with employers and other private and public partners
- Help with intergovernmental child support cases

The [Office of Family Assistance \(OFA\)](#) administers federal grant programs that foster family economic security and stability, including the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program and the Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (Tribal TANF) program, Native Employment Works, Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grants, Health Profession Opportunity Grants, and Tribal TANF- Child Welfare Coordination grants.

OFA aims to:

- Increase family economic security and stability by supporting state, territory, tribal, and community grantee partners to design and implement programs that focus simultaneously on parental employment and child and family well-being.
- Promote collaboration among human services agencies, workforce agencies, and educational institutions to encourage service delivery that addresses outcomes for both parents and their children.

The [Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation \(OPRE\)](#) studies ACF programs and the populations they serve through rigorous research and evaluation projects. These include evaluations of existing programs, evaluations of innovative approaches to helping low-income children and families, research syntheses, and descriptive and exploratory studies. OPRE also works to improve the sharing and analysis of data and coordinate performance management for ACF. OPRE aims to build and disseminate knowledge about effective approaches to helping low-income children and families.

A photograph of a man with a joyful expression carrying a young child on his shoulders. The man is wearing a white t-shirt with a dark pattern and a blue beaded bracelet. The child is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt with colorful patterns and text, and light blue shorts. The background is a lush green tree.

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