



Ongoing Research and Program Evaluation Efforts Related to Justice-Involved Parents and Youth



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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. Several ACF programs interact with justice-involved and incarcerated parents and youth in an effort to promote economic self-sufficiency and social well-being for them and their families. We are implementing rigorous research and evaluation projects to better understand how to serve these parents and youth. This brief describes those ongoing projects, as well as select past research and evaluation efforts related to justice-involved, incarcerated, and formerly incarcerated parents and youth.

Ongoing Research and Program Evaluation Efforts

The [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. B3 is evaluating a cognitive behavioral intervention, called Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Justice Involved Individuals Seeking Employment, designed to help fathers with criminal records find and retain better jobs. The study has released a [brief](#) on how three fatherhood programs implemented the intervention.

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.

In fall 2017, OPRE launched [Building Evidence on Employment Strategies for Low-Income Families \(BEES\)](#). 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, the project 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.

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, of whom 90% 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, and 70% had at most a high school education. Fifty-five percent were working at the time of enrollment, but their average earnings were below the poverty threshold for a single person. Noncustodial parents who have been incarcerated tend to owe large amounts of child support debt, largely accumulated during incarceration. These debts can create a barrier to successful reintegration. To reduce this barrier, six of the eight CSPED grantees offered state-owed debt compromise programs to CSPED participants. In addition, CSPED grantees developed other services and partnerships to meet the needs of the justice-involved population, such as expungement services, legal assistance, and close collaboration with the parole office and their staff. 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 for the [implementation study](#), [impact study](#), and [benefit-cost analysis](#) were released in 2019.

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 evidence in the areas of father and paternal relative engagement in child welfare, identify key touchpoints for engagement, and review collaborative continuous learning processes currently utilized in child welfare settings. This work will inform a pilot study to test high-priority father and paternal relative engagement strategies using a collaborative continuous learning process. The strategies explored may include engaging incarcerated and/or recently released fathers.

The [Fatherhood and Marriage Local Evaluation and Cross-Site \(FaMLE Cross Site\)](#) project supports high quality performance measure and evaluation data collection, strengthens grantee-led independent local evaluations, and conducts cross-site performance measures analysis for the third cohort (2015-2020) of ACF's Office of Family Assistance Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) grantees, including the Responsible Fatherhood Opportunities for Reentry and Mobility (ReFORM) grantees. Specifically, the project is implementing 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 more than 30 grantees and their independent evaluators as they conduct grantee-specific impact or descriptive evaluations of their programs. Two of those local evaluations are being conducted by ReFORM grantees who serve incarcerated and formerly incarcerated fathers. The project also analyzes how all 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. The 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. Their work focuses on a range of low-income populations, including fathers who are or have previously been incarcerated. In 2018, the FRPN published a [research brief](#) on parenting programs for incarcerated fathers.

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. About one in three of the fathers enrolled in the PACT evaluation of responsible fatherhood programs were on probation or parole when they entered the study. 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.

PACT also included four sub-studies. The fourth of these, [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 [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 The goal of PJAC is to improve consistent payment among noncustodial parents who are at the point of being referred to the legal system for civil contempt of court for failure to comply with their child support orders. PJAC aims to address parents' barriers to providing reliable payments by promoting positive engagement with the child support program and the other parent. Six sites (Arizona; California; Michigan; Ohio Franklin County; Ohio 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. ACF's Office of Child Support Enforcement (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 [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. One site, the Bridges & Pathways (Bridges) program in Chicago, IL, is targeting 16-24 year olds as they are released from incarceration to provide transitional employment, educational opportunities, and a cognitive-behavioral therapy component in an effort to curb youth violence and reduce recidivism. A report presenting the findings from a [feasibility study](#) of Bridges that looks at the program's design, implementation, and short-term impacts was released in 2019.

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 targeting incarcerated parents in two 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 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.

[Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services \(BICS\)](#) was a national demonstration exploring the potential relevance and application of behavioral economics principles to

child support services. In 2014, 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. Ohio tested several changes to their order modification process, including starting modification reviews by default for parents who become incarcerated. A [final report](#) summarizes implementation and impacts of the BICS interventions.

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 [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), including grantees that targeted incarcerated, soon-to-be released, and recently released fathers. The Guide includes curricula that were designed specifically for families where one parent is incarcerated or reentering the community, such as InsideOut Dad and the Creating Lasting Family Connections® Marriage Enhancement Program. 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 need.

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.

Currently, OFA's two top priorities are to:

- Increase family economic security and stability by supporting our 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 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.





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Source:

1. Bradley, E. G. (2013, September). The Case for Procedural Justice: Fairness as a Crime Prevention Tool. Retrieved from Community Policing Dispatch: <http://cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/09-2013/fairness-as-a-crime-prevention-tool.asp>