



Who Enrolls in Responsible Fatherhood Programs?

The federal government has a long-standing commitment to supporting father involvement in their children’s and families’ lives. Since 2005, Congress has funded \$150 million each year in healthy marriage (HM) and responsible fatherhood (RF) grants. The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has awarded and overseen three cohorts of these grants. RF grantees’ legislatively authorized activities promote responsible parenting, healthy marriage, and economic stability to support the long-term success of families (see Box 1 for a description of RF services). OFA works with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, also within ACF, to conduct research on how to best serve families through these grants.

Box 1. What are RF program services?

RF grantees must offer programs with activities that

1. promote marriage or sustaining marriage, (that is, healthy marriage and relationship education);
2. promote responsible parenting; and
3. foster economic stability.

The primary service that RF grantees provide is group-based workshops, usually lasting several weeks. Under the 2015 funding opportunity announcement, grantees were also required to offer case management, during which clients receive individualized attention and might receive referrals to other services.

Box 2. Practice Tips

This brief describes the characteristics of adults who enrolled in 40 RF programs that were funded in 2015. This information is intended to increase the field's understanding of who is interested in RF services. For practitioners, when designing and improving your program:

- Tailor your recruitment strategies based on how people typically hear about your program and your messaging based on why clients typically enroll. See Table 1 for the most common ways RF adult clients learned about the programs and reasons for enrolling.
- Develop or modify your program services to be appropriate and relevant for your typical clients. See the section on “What are the characteristics of RF clients?” for characteristics of people who enrolled in RF programs.
- Identify gaps in current services based on the characteristics of typical clients.

You can also use this information when you talk to funders about who is commonly served in RF programs, to show the reach of such programs.

Overview and methods

This snapshot describes the clients served by 40 RF grantees, which received five-year grants in September 2015. It covers clients enrolled from July 2016 through March 2019. Data were from an applicant characteristics survey that clients completed when they enrolled in the program. See Box 2 for practice tips on using the data in this snapshot. Separate snapshots describe the characteristics of clients served by HM programs, and an interim report describes a fuller range of findings including the services grantees provided and the ways that clients have changed from the beginning to the end of the program.¹

Whom did RF programs aim to serve and how many RF clients enrolled?

RF grantees enrolled just under 44,000 clients in about three years (Figure 1). RF grantees seek to engage fathers but can also serve mothers who are

Figure 1. Clients enrolled by RF target population from July 1, 2016, through March 31, 2019



interested in the program.² Each grantee can serve up to three distinct client populations:

- 1. RF community fathers:** adults enrolled in an RF program offered in communities.
- 2. RF community couples:** adults enrolled in an RF program with another individual who might be their romantic partner, co-parent of their child, or another adult raising the child with the father. Programs served both partners. Because the number of RF community couples clients is small, this brief combines results for RF community couples and RF community fathers.

¹ Avellar, Sarah, Alexandra Stanczyk, Nikki Aikens, Mathew Stange, and Grace Roemer (2020). The 2015 Cohort of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grantees: Interim Report on Grantee and Client Characteristics, OPRE Report 2020-67, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

² Services designed for and targeted to mothers, without first and primarily engaging fathers, are not allowable under the current RF grant funding authorization.

3. RF reentering fathers: adults who were incarcerated and were to be released within three to nine months or were recently released (up to six months earlier) and enrolled in an RF program. Programs were often offered in a prison or jail.³

How did clients learn about RF programs, and why did they enroll?

Clients learned about RF programs through direct contact with individuals and agencies. The three most common ways that clients reported that they learned about the program were by word of mouth, from program staff or at an event, or from a government agency or community organizations (Table 1). For both populations, word of mouth was the most common source of information about the program. Many clients also reported learning about the program from program staff or at local organizations, which suggests that grantees' on-site recruitment at community agencies and street outreach efforts can be successful.

Table 1. Most common ways RF adult clients* learned about program and reasons for enrolling

How learned about program and reasons for enrolling	Community fathers (%) ^a	Reentering fathers (%)
How learned about the program		
Word of mouth	40	36
Program staff or event	16	25
Government agency or community organization	27	12
Why chose to enroll in the program		
To learn about being a better parent	47	56
To find a job or a better job	20	7
To learn how to improve personal relationships	12	14
Number of clients	31,867	11,074

Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.
^a Estimates for community fathers include community couples. We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.
 * We excluded "other" from the ranking.

The desire to learn about being a better parent was RF clients' most common reason to enroll.

About half of both community fathers and reentering fathers reported enrolling to learn about being a better parent (Table 1). For community fathers, finding a job or a better job was the next most common reason for enrolling, whereas for reentering fathers it was learning how to improve personal relationships.

What are the characteristics of RF clients?

RF clients typically were male and were racially and ethnically diverse; about half were younger than 35. Most clients enrolled as community fathers

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of RF clients at enrollment

Characteristic	Community fathers (%) ^a	Reentering fathers (%)
Male ^b	86	94
Age		
Less than 18 years	1	<1
18 to 24 years	12	14
25 to 34 years	38	43
35 to 44 years	30	29
45 to 54 years	13	10
55 and older	5	3
Race/ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	22	11
Black, non-Hispanic	40	19
White, non-Hispanic	27	49
Other	8	6
Primarily speaks English in the home	88	93
Number of clients	32,846	11,074

Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.
^a Estimates for community fathers include community couples. We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.
^b Although RF programs focus on fathers, by law they must provide equal access to services to fathers and mothers, and so some mothers also enroll.

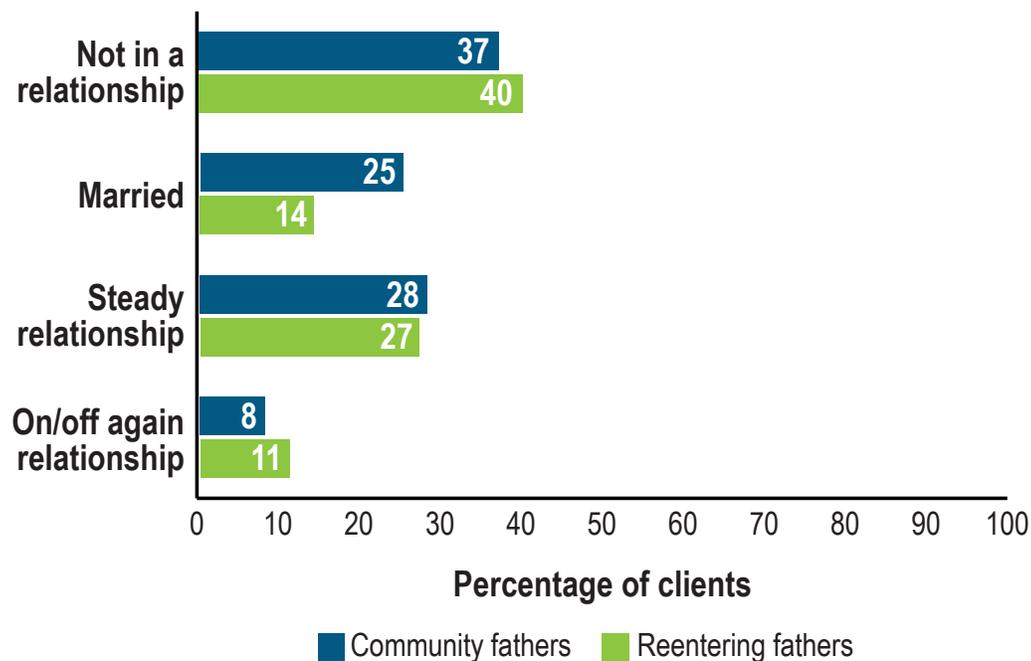
³ In the interim report (Avellar et al. 2020), this population is referred to as "incarcerated fathers."

(including fathers or couples served by programs in the community) were male, and almost all reentering fathers were male (Table 2). Mothers and women (such as spouses, partners, or coparents) who met the eligibility requirements could also participate in services. About 13 percent of community fathers were 24 years or younger and another 38 percent were 25 to 34 years. Among reentering fathers, less than 15 percent were 24 years or younger; 43 percent were ages 25 to 34 years. Almost half of reentering fathers were White, compared to about one-quarter of community fathers. Almost 20 percent of reentering fathers and 40 percent of community fathers were non-Hispanic Black and African American, and 11 percent of reentering fathers and 22 percent of community fathers were Hispanic or Latino. Almost all RF clients reported primarily speaking English at home.

Most fathers were in a romantic relationship when they enrolled in the program. About a quarter of community fathers were married, and a similar fraction were romantically involved with a partner on a steady basis (Figure 2). Among reentering fathers, 14 percent were married and 27 percent were in a steady relationship. About 10 percent of community and reentering fathers were in on-again and off-again relationships. Approximately 40 percent of community and reentering fathers were not in a relationship.

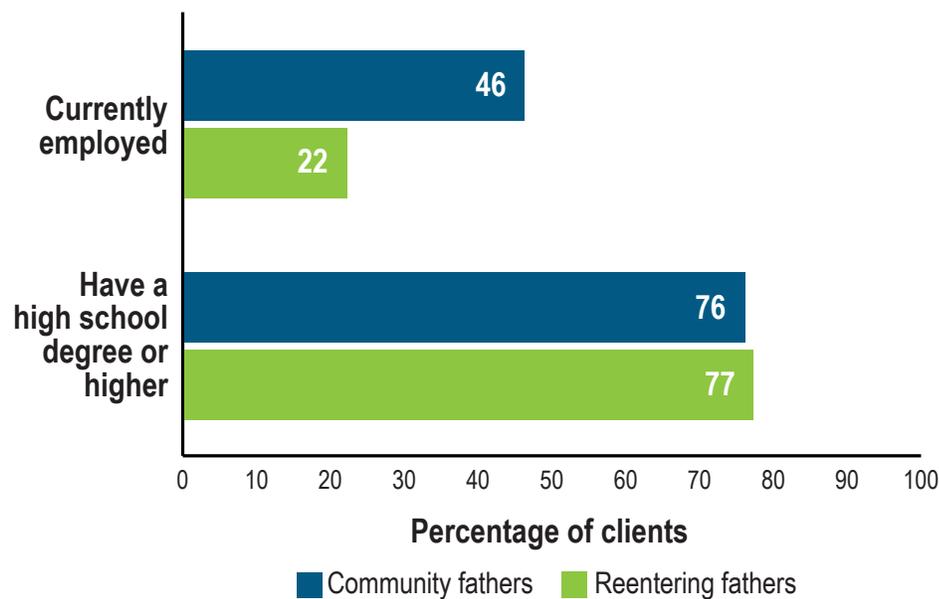
RF clients had about two biological or adoptive children, on average. Community fathers and reentering fathers both had 1.9 children, on average. Among RF clients in a relationship, almost two-thirds of community fathers were a parent figure to their partner’s children (62 percent), as were more than two-thirds of reentering fathers (69 percent).

Figure 2. Partner status of enrolled RF clients



Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.
 Notes: Estimates for community fathers include community couples. We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.

Figure 3. Socioeconomic well-being of enrolled HM adult clients



Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.

Notes: Percentages do not total to 100 because of rounding.

^a Estimates for community fathers include community couples. We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.

Table 3. Earnings of RF clients at enrollment

Earnings in past 30 days	Community fathers (%) ^a	Reentering fathers (%)
Less than \$500	51	76
\$500–\$1,000	15	4
\$1,001–\$2,000	13	3
\$2,001–\$3,000	7	1
\$3,001–\$4,000	4	1
\$4,001–\$5,000	2	<1
More than \$5,000	3	1
Missing	6	14
Number of clients	31,867	10,607

Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.

Notes: Percentages do not total to 100 because of rounding.

^a Estimates for community fathers include community couples. We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.

Most RF clients reported being unemployed at program enrollment, although most had at least a high school education. About half of community fathers and more than three-quarters of reentering fathers reported they were not working when they enrolled in the program (Figure 3). Consistent with low employment rates, about half of community fathers reported making less than \$500 in the past month, as did three-quarters of reentering fathers (Table 3). Three-quarters of community fathers and reentering fathers had a high school education or higher (Figure 3).

RF clients reported a range of challenges to finding and keeping a good job. The survey asked clients to report the extent to which they found seven issues to be a challenge for finding or keeping a good job (Table 4). A small percentage of fathers did not report any of the specified barriers as a challenge (17 percent of community fathers and 5 percent of reentering fathers). Among community fathers, the most commonly reported barriers were

Table 4. Challenges that make it hard for RF clients to find or keep a good job at enrollment

Barriers to finding or keeping a job	Community fathers (%)	Reentering fathers (%)
Not having reliable transportation		
Not at all	48	36
A little or a lot	48	52
Missing	4	12
Not having right clothes (including uniforms)		
Not at all	53	45
A little or a lot	42	43
Missing	5	12
Not having documentation for legal employment (e.g., birth certificate)		
Not at all	61	48
A little or a lot	34	39
Missing	6	13
Not having good enough childcare or family help		
Not at all	54	45
A little or a lot	40	41
Missing	6	14
Having a criminal record		
Not at all	46	10
A little or a lot	49	79
Missing	5	12
Not having the right skills or education		
Not at all	40	30
A little or a lot	55	58
Missing	5	13
Having substance use or mental health problems		
Not at all	68	40
A little or a lot	27	48
Missing	5	13
No barriers to finding or keeping a good job reported	17	5
Number of clients	31,867	10,607

Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.

Notes: Estimates for community fathers include community couples. We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.

not having the right skills or education (55 percent), having a criminal record (49 percent), and not having reliable transportation (48 percent). Among reentering fathers, the most commonly reported barriers were having a criminal record (79 percent), not having the right skills or education (56 percent), and not having reliable transportation (52 percent).

For many RF clients, either they or their household received federal assistance or other income supports. More than half (54 percent) of community fathers and 39 percent of reentering fathers reported that they or their household members received federal assistance or other income supports. The most common type of assistance was from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (39 percent of community fathers and 26 percent of reentering fathers), followed by the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (13 percent of community fathers and 11 percent of reentering fathers).

Most community fathers owned or rented a home. Forty-two percent of community fathers rented their home and 12 percent owned their home (Table 5). Among reentering fathers, the largest share (41 percent) reported an “other” living situation, which could include jail or prison.

Table 5. Housing situation of RF clients at enrollment

Housing situation	Community fathers (%) ^a	Reentering fathers (%)
Owens home	12	7
Rents home	42	21
Lives rent-free with a relative or someone else who rents or owns the home	20	18
Lives in shelter, halfway house, or treatment center	14	8
Lives on streets or in car, abandoned building, or other place not meant for sleeping	3	3
Other	8	41
Missing	1	3
Number of clients	32,846	11,074

Source: Applicant characteristics survey, July 2016 through March 2019.

^a Estimates for community fathers include community couples. We analyzed clients individually, including those who enrolled with their partner as a couple.

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