


Low-Income Nonresident Fatherhood: A Literature Review With Implications for Practice and Research

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Abstract

The emerging literature on fatherhood is contributing to the reframing of public perceptions of low-income nonresident fathers by focusing on father presence rather than absence. Insights into how and when fathers contribute to their children beyond financial support provides for a strengths-based perspective to engage fathers in services provided for their children. A review of this literature includes practice implications related to the need for: (a) father engagement training for agency staff, (b) father-friendly programs and services, (c) child support policy reform, and (d) more research on the issue of fatherhood in the 21st century.

Keywords

fathers, low-income men, child support, nonresident fatherhood, father engagement

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The emerging literature on low-income nonresident fatherhood highlights the importance of engaging fathers in the institutions designed to facilitate support for their children. Nonresident fatherhood has become increasingly important where nearly half of all children will experience living without their biological father during childhood, including two thirds of African American children (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013; King, Harris, & Heard, 2004). Using data related to paternity and father involvement, scholars and practitioners are identifying strengths-based approaches that focus on father presence rather than father absence in order to keep vulnerable fathers engaged in parenting beyond the role of financial contributor. This literature review features current research on low-income nonresident fatherhood in order to identify through a strengths-based lens, how agencies can effectively engage fathers in services provided for

their children. The primary focus is on low-income men who are living apart from one or more of their children.

In this context, the strengths-based perspective includes the recognition of personal assets that can reflect a father's capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, dreams, and hopes (Saleebey, 1996, p. 296). While acknowledging the realities of various problems or barriers, this perspective can take into account the resources

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within an individual, family, or community (Saleebey, 1996). Three key elements of the strengths-based perspective include resilience, empowerment, and membership. In the context of this review, resilience refers to a father's skills, abilities, knowledge, and insight gained through his life struggles that can contribute to the energy and skills to overcome current and future obstacles (Saleebey, 1996, p. 298). Empowerment involves assisting fathers in their discovery and use of resources within themselves and their environment (Saleebey, 1996, p. 298). Finally, it is built upon the recognition that it is a father's responsibility to recognize his role as a member of a family and community in order to create individual and collective meaning and capacity (Saleebey, 1996, p. 299). Agency programs and practices have begun to reflect a recognition of the importance of the capacities and willingness of fathers to be active in the lives of their children. The overall goal of this review is to assess and synthesize the research on low-income nonresident fatherhood in order to further integrate father-friendly perspectives into agency culture, decision-making, and practices.

Background

Today there are between 7.5 and 9.5 million nonresident fathers in the United States and approximately 5 million qualify as low-income or economically vulnerable, along with 4 out of 10 of these nonresident fathers receiving formal child support orders (Mincy, Jethwani-Keyser, & Klempin, 2015). Low-income nonresident fathers are generally younger, less educated, underemployed, and twice as likely to have substance abuse problems in comparison to resident fathers (Jones & Mosher, 2013). In addition, the rate of births to unmarried women ages 15 to 44 was 40.3% in 2015, including rates for non-Hispanic White women (29.2%), Hispanic women (53%), and for non-Hispanic Black women (70.5%) (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Driscoll, & Mathews, 2015). Family relations have become more complex due to the increased flexibility related to the role and function of marriage, delays of marriage for

younger adults, and reluctance of men to wed related to the decline in the rate of employment and earnings (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Mincy et al., 2015). Studies have found that low-income men still hold the institution of marriage in high regard, yet they also believe that it requires a certain amount of financial and personal stability (Edin & Nelson, 2013). As a result, economic vulnerability becomes a significant factor in the declining rates of marriage among this population (Nelson, 2004). Despite the declining marriage rate, many low-income men possess a strong positive desire for raising children and eagerly embrace their paternity (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Furstenberg, 1995).

Scholars, practitioners, and policymakers have contributed to a revised fatherhood narrative by looking beyond financial support as a measure of father involvement (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013; Cabrera et al., 2004; Palkovitz, 2007). Large data sets (e.g., National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, and the National Survey of Families and Households [NSFH]) are providing scholars with the opportunity to look more closely at the diversity of fathers, including the measurement of engagement, accessibility, responsibility, and measures of child/father relationships (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013; Jones & Mosher, 2013; King et al., 2004). Furthermore, ethnographic works such as "Doing the Best I Can," by sociologists Kathryn Edin and Timothy Nelson (2013), provide a more nuanced picture of unmarried fathers that does not fit neatly into old caricatures of the so-called "deadbeat dad." Understanding the perspectives of fathers and how they participate in the lives of their children can enhance the effectiveness of service providers seeking ways to identify and leverage the strengths of this population.

Locating Father Involvement

A close examination of father involvement by type and subgroups reveals variation across a child's lifespan. For example, research has identified high levels of paternal involvement,

even among nonresidential fathers, particularly with younger children (Carlson & McLanahan, 2002; Mincy, Garfinkle, & Nepomnyaschy, 2005). Being present at childbirth can be a milestone experience for fathers (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 2003) and is often a strong predictor of further involvement in the life of a child over time (Bellamy, Thullen, & Hans, 2015). Furthermore, during adolescence, nonresident fathers not only participate in the lives of well-adjusted children but also get involved when children exhibit problem behaviors (Coley & Medeiros, 2007; Caldwell, Bell, Brooks, Ward, & Jennings, 2010). In one NSFH study of 453 adolescents, the majority of children (70%) had contact with their nonresident father at least once a week in person, by phone, or by mail (King & Sobolewski, 2006). Regular contact and conversations can contribute to reduced adolescent problem behaviors and delinquency (Coley & Medeiros, 2007).

In addition, there are differences in child-father interaction by race and ethnicity. Some evidence suggests that fathers of color are more involved during infancy and middle school (Behnke & Allen, 2007) and that unmarried African American fathers, on the whole, often (re)join the household in the child's early years after being absent during the birth (Nelson, 2004). Still other findings suggest that African American men had the highest rate of newborn visitation or some informal involvement when compared to other groups, despite being the least likely to be married to or live with the mother (Coles & Green, 2010). Research on Hispanic fathers is limited, although some studies indicate that nonresident Hispanic fathers are generally the least likely to visit their child (King et al., 2004). This type of limited visitation can lead to the child's loss of parental guidance that bolsters cognitive social behaviors, school readiness, and educational aspirations (Behnke & Allen, 2007; King et al., 2004; Lamb, 2010). Scholars have found that the engagement of low-income Hispanic fathers with their children is affected by many of the same factors experienced by low-income African American fathers (e.g., the father-mother relationship,

employment stability, access to social support networks, etc.), but they also vary with regard to such factors as immigration history and status as well as language capacities (Behnke & Allen, 2007; Cabrera & Bradly, 2012). While there are mixed research findings among men of color related to nonresident father involvement, pointing to the need for further research, there is sufficient evidence that father involvement should not be assessed in terms of the continuous life-stage development of the children. For example, the absence in one stage of childhood does not necessarily preclude or secure involvement at a future stage. In addition, it has become increasingly important to assess the quality of father-child relationships.

The quality of involvement between nonresidential fathers and their children has significant effects on children. In a meta-analysis of 52 studies on nonresidential fatherhood and children, the existence of high-quality father-child relationships had more significant effects than the quantity of child-father interaction or financial support (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013). Throughout childhood, recreational time represents a high percentage of child-father interaction. While this time can be discounted with the label of "Disneyland dad," this type of interaction contributes to the father-child bond that can lead to a significant impact on a child's well-being and outcomes (e.g., social, behavioral, academic/cognitive, and emotional/psychological) (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013). Preferences for types of involvement are different among subgroups. For example, when examining child-father interaction in a variety of activities, Hispanic children reported more father interaction in school projects, African American children had more interaction with fathers through church activities, and White children identified more interaction through sports activities and watching movies (King et al., 2004). Despite the diverse types of contact, the sense of closeness in father-child relationships across racial/ethnic categories appeared similar (King et al., 2004). Still, some research suggests that African American and Hispanic dads are generally more

nurturing, engaged, concerned, emotionally supportive, and less controlling than White fathers (Behnke & Allen, 2007).

Through their own voices, we learn that many men believe that good fathers ought to “provide for their children financially, offer discipline and protection, dispense wisdom and advice, serve as a moral guide, show love, facilitate open and honest communication, and spend quality time” (Edin & Nelson, 2013, p. 110). In addition, studies reveal that high numbers of nonresident fathers offer other forms of support beyond formal child support payments (e.g., gifts, transportation, paying for children’s clothing and childcare items, chores) (Cabrera et al., 2004; Carlson & McLanahan, 2002). Beyond father-child contact and support, the quality of the contact that builds father-child relationships is important, especially when nonresident fathers show a willingness and resiliency to remain involved, despite the significant obstacles faced by this population.

Obstacles to Father Involvement

Low-income men often face major obstacles to their successful involvement with their children. These challenges often include poverty, incarceration, unemployment, substance abuse, lack of parenting skills, trauma, depression, or the competing demands of multiple children with multiple mothers (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Roy & Dyson, 2010). In addition, men of color are further impacted by current forms of discrimination and policies that create or reinforce structural and institutional barriers such as poverty, persistent racial inequality, and disproportionate incarceration (Bhenke & Allen, 2007; Keefe et al., 2017; Mills, 2010; Waller & Swisher, 2006). The stressors of surviving any one of these challenges can lead to depression, a reduction in behavioral and emotional engagement, relationship fragility with the mothers, and ultimately reduced father involvement in the lives of their children (Coakley, Kelley, & Bartlett, 2014; Roy & Dyson, 2010).

The mother-father relationship has emerged as one of the most important factors in promoting nonresident father involvement

(Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Edin & Nelson, 2013). When coparents have a positive relationship, fathers are more likely to be physically and emotionally involved with their child. Unfortunately, relationship instability (e.g., father or mother’s new romantic partner prevents the biological mother from allowing father engagement with the child) contributes to increased stress levels among mothers, regardless of the introduction of a third party, which ultimately disadvantages the child and may limit father-child contact (Fagan & Kauffman, 2015; Halpern-Meekin & Turney, 2016). Diminishing father engagement can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle in which nonresident fathers struggle to stay involved despite the lack of daily exposure to and interaction with their children. This experience, in turn, diminishes their identity as a father and thereby allows them to drift further away from their children (Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1993).

Despite significant obstacles, fathers can overcome these challenges and emerge as caretakers through informal arrangements, “in kind” caretaking, parent monitoring, and extended family relations (King et al., 2004; Roy & Vesely, 2010). The documentation of father involvement and the identification of the nuances of how fathers can and want to engage are leading to a redefinition of fatherhood based on notions of resiliency (Allen & Daly, 2007; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Mincy et al., 2015; Waller, 2009). As service providers engage fathers beyond their role as financial providers, low-income fathers are increasingly able to articulate their motivations to stay involved with their children as well as assert their role as a member of the family (Lamb, 2000; Roy & Dyson, 2010; Waller, 2009).

Implications for Practice

Father involvement is impacted by policies, programs, and practices that either encourage or impede the paternal role. Traditionally, the focus of social policy and practice was to increase the financial participation of fathers through the use of penalties or through employment training services (English, Brummel, & Martens, 2009; Mills, 2010). In recent decades,

however, government and community-based agencies have expanded beyond child financial support to include encouragement of father involvement through father-friendly services and practices.

Father-Friendly Programs and Services

Specialized programs are facilitating father involvement by building on the desires of nonresident fathers to overcome barriers to responsible fatherhood. In the past few decades fatherhood initiatives and family and parenting programs implemented by government and community organizations have sought to increase the contributions of fathers to the well-being of their children by addressing a variety of needs (e.g., parenting, relationship skill building, job training, and parent-child bonding; Lee, Yelick, Brisebois, & Banks, 2011; National Family Preservation Network, 2016; Nock & Einolf, 2008; Perry, Rollins, Sabree, & Grooms, 2015). While growing in number, father-friendly programs are not readily available in different parts of the country (Avellar et al., 2011). Furthermore, many programs on parenting, such as early Head Start programs, were not well-attended, with only 17% of low-income fathers participating in at least one parent education program and fewer than 10% involved in father-only programs (Lee et al., 2011).

Traditional parenting programs are often not seen as desirable by fathers when contrasted with programs that address their urgent needs (e.g., unemployment, lack of money to purchase items for children, inability to pay child support, maintaining employment, and paying bills; Lee et al., 2011; National Fatherhood Initiative, 2016). However, other successful programs include the perspective that men can be fathers even if they cannot serve as breadwinners (Roy & Dyson, 2010). While few programs focused on nonresident fathers have been rigorously evaluated (National Family Preservation Network, 2016), there are still lessons to be learned from promising new programs (Fagan & Kaufman, 2015; Friend, Max, Holcomb, Edin, & Dion, 2016; Lee et al., 2011;

Perry et al., 2015). For example, Parents and Children Together (PACT), an evaluation of Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs funded by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), conducted interviews with participants of four RF programs that included parenting and relationship support and peer support in group settings. PACT found that a quarter of participants, the majority of whom were African Americans, had seen some improvements in their communications with the coparent and often cited the communication skills they gained through the RF programs (Friend et al., 2016). Even after the dissolution of a relationship with the mother, efforts to enhance cooperative coparenting skills may lead to ongoing contact with the children of nonresidential fathers (Carlson et al., 2008). When coparents have a positive relationship, fathers are more likely to be physically and emotionally involved with their child(ren) (Fagan & Kaufman, 2015). While mothers generally control access to the children, they can also contribute to affirming the paternal identity of the father by encouraging him to engage in regular contact with his child (Fagan & Kaufman, 2015; Goldberg, 2013). The positive benefits can also impact material support, especially when improved relationships contribute to more formal and informal support (Edin & Nelson, 2013). One strategy for encouraging participation in relationship-focused workshops is to integrate content on healthy relationships into parenting and economic services that are better attended (Friend et al., 2016).

In addition, effective fatherhood programs utilize community-based strategies that support father-child engagement. For example, the FATHER Project (Fostering Actions to Help Earnings and Responsibility administered by Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota since 2004) supports nonresident fathers to be emotionally and financially available for their children through a network of services (Friend et al., 2016). These community-based services encompass case management, employment assistance, child support services, and parenting support services. Similarly, The Male Involvement Network (MIN) uses a relational and ecological approach that builds partnerships and builds upon the strengths of fathers,

families, and community to reinforce the father-child relationship. MIN not only works with nonresident fathers on services targeted to their individual needs, it also encompasses policy and community strategies that increase knowledge and support for fathers (Gordon et al., 2012). Furthermore, these types of programs are consciously operating in safe settings where facilitators and participants feel mutually respected and understood (Perry et al., 2015). Parenting classes inside human service agencies are often perceived as a stigmatizing experience for urban low-income men. Fathers identify peer mentorship and activity-based programs located in the community as less stigmatizing and more accessible (Lee et al., 2011). When surveyed about their views of parenting, men cite other men and fathers as their primary source of parenting information, followed by the church and other family or community members (Lee et al., 2011). Finally, programs that incorporate culturally competent practices and values relevant to different racial and ethnic groups are viewed as providing additional benefits for fathers and their children (Caldwell et al., 2010).

Looking into the future, recent investments by the Federal OFA may lead to new programs that help economically and socially disadvantaged fathers increase their parental involvement. For example, in 2015, OFA awarded 5-year RF grants to 39 organizations, Healthy Marriage grants to 46 organizations, and additional awards to programs that serve incarcerated fathers and fathers reentering society (Israel, Behrmann, & Wulfsohn, 2017). Incarcerated fathers (disproportionately represented by African Americans), and those reentering their communities, confront significant barriers to responsible fatherhood, including insufficient preparation for reentry that inhibits the capacity of a father to provide for his children (Keefe et al., 2017; Perry & Bright, 2012). One promising reentry program (located in Cincinnati, Ohio called the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Justice Involved Individuals Seeking Employment) combines traditional job-readiness services and cognitive behavioral skill-building to aid men with their efforts to join the marketplace

(Israel et al., 2017). Still early in its implementation, evaluation results are not yet available.

Child Support Policy: Moving from Enforcement to Encouragement

Recent research suggests that there is a growing population of nonresident fathers who cannot pay child support due to a substantial overestimate of their ability to pay, often resulting in negligible additional financial support for the children (Mincy et al., 2015). Currently, 4 out of every 10 nonresident fathers have child support orders, with only 20% of them paying all the child support that is owed (Mincy et al., 2015). In most states, severe monetary penalties, driver's license suspension, or even jail time are the consequences of failing to provide child support payments. As a result of this punitive system, many men with formal child support orders circumvent the system by avoiding formal employment and entering the informal labor market to avoid automatic wage deductions (Mincy et al., 2015). The criminalization of those who fail to pay child support perpetuates a downward spiral that inhibits fathers from being able to experience sufficient formal or informal contact with their children, often leading to greater deficits for the child (Mills, 2010).

Child support agencies can alter their relationship with the nonresident fathers by distinguishing between men who cannot pay and those who will not pay by assessing the father's capacities and circumstances and providing credit for nonfinancial aspects of fatherhood (Mincy et al., 2015). Nonresident fathers are more likely to pay if they feel that they have regular and fulfilling relationships with their children (Nelson, 2004). Child support policies can credit fathers for in-kind forms of support and reward behaviors that benefit both the child and the father (Mills, 2010). By giving primary attention to the engagement of the father (shifting from viewing fathers as "doing the best I can ... with what is left over" to "doing more than I thought I could"), child support program

staff can view support payments as one of several future outcomes (Edin & Nelson, 2013, p. 119).

Supportive Policies and Practices

Increased attention to father involvement has led to an examination of human service agency policies and practices and their impact on fatherhood (Arroyo & Peek, 2015). Some human service agencies have included father engagement interventions as a part of ongoing evaluations of services and are working to include fathers in policy and program development. For example, in Alameda County, California, the elected county officials adopted the following seven principles: (1) include the needs of fathers in the structuring of services, (2) provide father-friendly services to increase the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children, (3) feature positive images of fathers using multiple media, (4) create staff positions to serve fathers, (5) train staff on fatherhood issues, (6) expect father participation in policy and program development, and (7) design programs for fathers (Alameda County Father Corps, 2015). Two examples of how these principles can be implemented can be seen in the process of adjusting family visitation policies to reaffirm the notion that fathers are not visitors in their children's lives and relabeling case files to reflect the names of both the mother and the father where the parents are perceived to have equal importance. By reexamining an agency's relationship with the father from initial intake to ongoing case management, staff can play a major role in enhancing child well-being as well as empower, affirm, and support paternal involvement.

In addition, human service agencies can reinforce their commitment to engaging low-income nonresidential fathers through the use of father-engagement practices that promote father participation. Staff training on father engagement focuses on fatherhood resources, parent recruitment and retention strategies, as well as cross-system and intra-agency collaboration on behalf of the men (Gordon et al., 2012). Furthermore, while regularly scheduled

staff training sessions are important, studies have shown that follow-up "booster" training sessions can help staff further confront implicit biases that threaten staff effectiveness (English et al., 2009). Findings from evaluations of father engagement training programs suggest that child welfare workers who receive such training are more likely to (1) share the case planning process with fathers and engage fathers during meetings, (2) consider fathers as a valid child placement option, and (3) work with fathers who express interest in having their children live with them (English et al., 2009; Malm, Murray, & Green, 2006). It is also worth noting that if fathers were located and identified early in the opening of a child welfare case, their involvement in case planning increased over time; however, if fathers were not identified early, efforts to include them decreased substantially after 6 months (Arroyo & Peek, 2015; English et al., 2009). In a similar finding, Malm et al. (2006) noted that if the father was not engaged in the first 30 days of a child entering the child protective services (CPS) system, he was less likely to be contacted. Children who had contact in the past year with a noncustodial father were less likely to be placed in out-of-home care (Bellamy, 2009) and were more likely, in cases where the father was identified, to be reunified or permanently placed with a parent (Burrus, Green, Worcel, Finigan, & Furrer, 2012).

Staff also benefit from an increased understanding of how implicit gender, class, and racial bias may be reflected in agency practices and policies that can lead to both negative attitudes and low expectations for nonresident fathers, despite a general understanding that fathers should be involved in the lives of their children (Arroyo & Peek, 2015). An increasing number of studies have examined the role of child welfare staff characteristics (e.g., demographics, education, and employment) and have found that there are varying impacts, by race (McBeath, Chuang, Bunker, & Blakeslee, 2014), gender (Arroyo & Peek, 2015), education, and employment (Graham, Dettlaff, Baumann, & Fluke, 2015). While some have found effects by caseworker characteristics (Arroyo & Peek, 2015), others

find that they may only serve as mediating factors (Graham et al., 2015). Although the impact of caseworker characteristics is not clear, overcoming barriers to father engagement that include staff reluctance to engage fathers may require new skills related to promoting coparenting, navigating parental conflict, and assessing the risk of paternal involvement, especially since high-conflict relationships can limit progress and cooperation (Arroyo & Peek, 2015; Perry et al., 2015). These new skills may include facilitating the use of male/female training partners, finding ways to acknowledge the predominantly female human services workforce, providing staff coaching, and reinforcing an ongoing focus on father involvement (Arroyo & Peek, 2015). To support service providers, agencies need to provide clear guidance and training that ensures that all parties feel supported and have the necessary knowledge and resources to address issues as they arise.

In summary, it is increasingly evident that concerted efforts are being made to engage nonresident fathers in programs and practices, especially agency outreach to fathers through community sources that are less stigmatizing to low-income nonresident fathers by meeting with fathers in the communities where they live. The community partnership between nonprofits and public sector human service agencies is crucial to strengths-based practice, as it can facilitate a comprehensive approach to fatherhood. In addition, programs that empower fathers to identify their own strengths, while addressing the significant challenges facing low-income nonresident fathers, can keep men from being isolated from their children. Furthermore, social services are taking a reflective look at how their interactions as an agency and as staff can impact family dynamics that can help or hinder child-father engagement. These agency and staff interactions need to be regularly revisited in order to move beyond one-time training events. While there is still a significant gap between child support orders and the capacity of fathers to meet them, there needs to be concerted policy reform to diminish punitive consequences for fathers who are

willing, but unable, to meet the legal obligation through financial contributions.

Conclusion

This analysis of the emerging literature on low-income nonresident fathers has implications for future strengths-based policies and practices. Recent studies help to shift the focus on fatherhood as a social problem to fatherhood as a social resource by identifying implications for father-friendly programming, child support policy reform, and father engagement training that can promote strengths-based approaches to curbing the social fragmentation experienced in many communities. These new ways of conceptualizing fatherhood call for a broad range of interconnected strategies that focus on the strengths of fathers and the nonfinancial aspects of parenting as well as the need for staff training, policy development, and program redesign.

While the evolving literature and practice innovations highlight the potential for involving low-income fathers, many issues need attention in both practice and research. Although some studies have sought to identify what works best with regard to program accessibility and relevance, there is a continuing need for more evidence to support the development of father involvement. More participatory and community-based research that includes low-income fathers is needed in order to identify the strategies needed to support low-income fathers. And finally, many questions remain. How can practitioners and policymakers approach this issue from a strengths-based “father presence” perspective while also addressing the economic and social needs of mothers and children? How do we leverage resources to invest in fathers as mentors to other fathers and their children? How can mothers and fathers develop positive coparenting scripts that respect and value each other’s role? How do we build upon the strengths and resources within communities of color? With such complex multilayered ecological factors contributing to the mounting barriers that prevent low-income nonresident

fathers from staying involved in the lives of their children, what kind of policy changes could have a positive impact? While the answers to these complex questions have yet to emerge, at least a productive and dynamic conversation has begun.

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