

FATHERS



AT WORK

# *Working Dads*

FINAL REPORT ON THE FATHERS AT WORK INITIATIVE

SHAYNE SPAULDING, JEAN BALDWIN GROSSMAN AND DEE WALLACE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**PPV** Public/Private Ventures

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We are grateful to the staff and volunteers of the organizations that participated in Fathers at Work—Center for Employment Opportunities; Impact Services; Rubicon Programs; STRIVE (now Harborquest); Total Action Against Poverty; and Vocational Foundation, Inc. We deeply appreciate their work with young noncustodial fathers and their willingness to have us document it. Staff from these six organizations opened their operations to our scrutiny, assisted in the administration of our surveys and responded to our data-collection requests, shared their thoughts in numerous interviews and created a valuable learning community. The Fathers at Work demonstration, and this report, would not have been possible without their commitment, patience and hard work.

Five child support agencies played essential roles in the initiative. They are: Contra Costa County Department of Child Support Services; Illinois Department of Public Aid; New York City Office of Child Support Enforcement; Philadelphia Family Court; and Virginia Office of Child Support Enforcement. These agencies and their staff provided critical data, information and services to the sites, program participants and the demonstration.

We also appreciate the involvement of several key partners. We are grateful to the National Partnership for Community Leadership (NPCL); the Legal Action Center and National HIRE Network; the Center for Fathers, Families and Public Policy; the Center for Law and Social Policy; and Pam Wilson for their contributions to P/PV's technical assistance efforts. We thank MDRC for providing us with the Parents' Fair Share control group data and Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing for the Fragile Families data.

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Finally, we applaud the young men who participated in Fathers at Work; they made invaluable contributions to our learning about the challenges and achievements of young noncustodial fathers striving to support their families.

## *Executive Summary*

**H**alf of all children in the United States with family incomes below the poverty line live with their mother, with their father living elsewhere (Sorensen 2003). Noncustodial fathers have an essential role to play—both financially and emotionally—in the well-being and support of their children, yet many are poor themselves and face multiple challenges, including low education levels, limited work experience and criminal records. These barriers make it difficult to succeed in the labor market and provide adequate support for their children.

During the past several decades, many efforts have focused on the crisis that lies at the intersection of proliferating single-parent households, absent fathers and poverty. In 2001, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation launched Fathers at Work to test approaches for helping young low-income noncustodial fathers provide for themselves and their children; the project was designed to inform practitioners and policymakers about effective interventions for this population. Six community-based workforce organizations from across the country were selected to participate and provided a combination of employment, child support and parenting services. Participants in Fathers at Work had an average age of 26 and were overwhelmingly men of color (about three quarters were African American and 18 percent were Hispanic); a majority had a criminal record. Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) was responsible for overseeing the initiative and conducting its evaluation and for creating a series of reports and tools for the field based on lessons from Fathers at Work. The final report, from which this summary is drawn, explores the strategies used by the six sites, presents evidence of the program model's effectiveness and offers recommendations for policy and practice.

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### CONTEXT

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From the 1970s to the 1990s, young men of color faced a number of labor market challenges, including declining real wages and increasing unemployment. At the same time, incarceration rates were on the rise, particularly for drug-related crimes, which often carried mandatory minimum sentences. A burgeoning “fatherhood movement” brought new attention to the growing number of fatherless households and the impact of this trend on American families and society. Meanwhile, policymakers sought to make low-income parents more financially responsible for their children by moving families off welfare and by strengthening the child support system in ways that affected families at all income levels.

Policy changes in the 1990s made it easier for states to locate absent fathers, garnish wages and impose penalties for nonpayment of child support. At the same time, most states continued to withhold the majority of the child support collected on behalf of families receiving public assistance (to reimburse welfare costs)—a practice that continues

to this day. As a result, some families receiving welfare are no better off when fathers pay child support. Many noncustodial fathers choose to make financial contributions to their children “informally” by giving money directly to the mother or by purchasing items for their children, rather than paying through the formal child support system.

Several research projects conducted during the 1990s examined approaches to helping noncustodial fathers participate in the formal economy and support their children. Three key evaluations preceded Fathers at Work and offered insights into how to structure Fathers at Work’s programs and services: the Young Unwed Fathers Project (YUFP), Parents’ Fair Share (PFS) and the Office of Child Support Enforcement’s Responsible Fatherhood Programs (RFP). Each provided employment services, addressed child support issues and offered parenting instruction. While these initiatives suggested important lessons about how to shape Fathers at Work, the impact of the programs was either minimal or not measured, leaving many unanswered questions about what works for serving this population.

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## THE FATHERS AT WORK INITIATIVE

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Fathers at Work was created to help young noncustodial fathers achieve three principal goals:

- ◆ Increase their employment and earnings;
- ◆ Become more involved in their children’s lives; and
- ◆ Increase their financial support of their children.

In addition, the initiative sought to explore the role community-based workforce development programs could play in meeting the needs of young fathers.

Organizations were required to demonstrate a history of strong employment services and a track record of working with young, low-income men (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation 2000). While organizations were not expected to start with extensive knowledge of the child support system, they had to develop formal partnerships with their respective local child support enforcement agencies. The six organizations had to commit to serve at least 100 men—placing at least 75 of them into jobs—each year for three years and to provide a minimum of 12 months of retention services. Organizations were also asked to commit to increasing parental engagement and child support compliance. Eligible participants were noncustodial fathers 30 years old or younger earning less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Two of the six selected organizations exclusively served noncustodial fathers who were formerly incarcerated.



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## THE EVALUATION

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Fathers at Work sites launched their mix of employment, fatherhood and child support services prior to the official start of the evaluation, enabling them to identify and address challenges associated with implementing new programs. The organizations began enrolling fathers for the evaluation between January and June of 2001, and the demonstration continued for three years at each site, through June of 2004.

While the evaluation was initially designed as an outcomes study—analyzing changes in outcomes over time—P/PV later sought to identify a comparison group that could help us understand the participant outcomes we were observing. We were able to find two comparison groups to serve as benchmarks against which we could compare the changes experienced by Fathers at Work participants. Using a statistical method (propensity score matching), we selected two groups of noncustodial fathers (one from the control group of MDRC’s Parents’ Fair Share demonstration and one from the Fragile Families survey dataset) who were very similar to the Fathers at Work participants on a number of different dimensions, such as their age, race, criminal conviction status, prior work experience, the age of their child, etc. We then compared outcomes of the Fathers at Work participants with outcomes of the fathers in the other two datasets. While we cannot be absolutely certain that any differences between the groups’ outcomes are due to the program (because neither of our comparison groups is *exactly* like the Fathers at Work participants), our approach does allow us to explore the promise of the Fathers at Work model beyond what would be possible using a simple outcomes study.

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## THE PARTICIPANTS

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While Fathers at Work participants were drawn from five different cities across the country, the barriers and challenges they faced were remarkably similar. A combination of low education levels, spotty work histories and criminal records created formidable obstacles to financial stability, which likely made it difficult for them to support their children. Furthermore, the fathers had unstable living conditions—many had recently been homeless—and had few people they could go to for help in getting a job. The fathers reported frequent contact and strong relationships with their children but also wanted to spend more time with them. Four out of ten participants were enrolled in the formal child support system, but most provided informal support.

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## THE PROGRAMS AND IMPLEMENTATION

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The organizations chosen for the demonstration were all mature and successful employment and training organizations, though they had not offered the triumvirate of services that characterized the Fathers at Work model: employment, child support and fatherhood services. Although all these programs followed a common model of service provision, sites were given the flexibility to tailor their programs to reflect local circumstances and the particular population served. While all six organizations offered job placement services and based fatherhood workshops on the same curriculum, they diverged in their provision of skills training, the intensity of available fatherhood services and the way they worked with child support.

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## THE ORGANIZATIONS

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The six organizations selected to participate in the initiative were:

**Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO)**—Located in downtown Manhattan, CEO has been providing employment and training services to people released from jail or prison since the late 1970s. At the core of CEO's employment strategy is a paid transitional work program. As a part of Fathers at Work, CEO offered a weeklong pre-employment and life-skills training, individualized job development services, fatherhood workshops, child support advocacy and family mediation services.

**Impact Services, Inc. (Impact)**—Since 1974, Impact has offered training programs for low-income people in Philadelphia and its surrounding areas. All of Impact's Fathers at Work participants lived in residential work-release facilities and were expected to find employment and adhere to elements of an individualized release plan. For child support enforcement, Impact developed a unique relationship with the Pennsylvania Family Court, streamlining court processes for its participants.

**Rubicon Programs, Inc. (Rubicon)**—Located in Richmond, CA, Rubicon has been providing a wide array of social services—including housing assistance, mental health services and other support services—since its founding in 1973. Rubicon's Fathers at Work offerings included job readiness and skills training, job placement services, peer support groups and on-site child support assistance provided through a partnership with the Contra Costa Department of Child Support Services (DCSS).

**Support and Training Result in Valuable Employees (STRIVE)**—STRIVE is a nonprofit job training and placement organization that serves low-income residents in Chicago and is part of a national network of affiliated organizations of the same name.<sup>1</sup> Started in 1990, STRIVE Chicago's services consist of four weeks of classroom-based soft skills training, followed by rapid placement into a job and two years of retention services. Through Fathers at Work, the organization also offered parenting support groups for men and women and had an active alumni group.

**Total Action Against Poverty (TAP)**—TAP was founded in 1965 as the designated community-action agency serving the Roanoke Valley in southwest Virginia. TAP operates more than 30 programs, including a wide range of job training and educational services, known collectively as This Valley Works. Core Fathers at Work services included individualized job placement, fatherhood support groups and leadership development activities. In addition, TAP had a staff person dedicated to addressing child support issues who acted as a quasi-employee of the Virginia Office of Child Support Enforcement.

**Vocational Foundation, Inc. (VFI)**—VFI was founded in 1936 to help New York City's disadvantaged youth achieve educational and employment goals. VFI has operated programs for young fathers since 1984, building upon this experience to develop its new Young Fathers program as part of Fathers at Work. Participants were each supported by a primary case manager, called a Career Advisor, who provided career counseling, crisis intervention and resource referrals. Career Advisors also conducted fatherhood workshops and coordinated with child support enforcement, and they provided follow-up support after participants completed the program.



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## THE STRATEGIES

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The following is a summary of the strategies used by the six Fathers at Work sites:

### RECRUITMENT

The organizations enrolled 1,018 participants during the initiative, compared with the goal of 1,800 (300 per organization over the three years of the demonstration). They developed a variety of innovative approaches to attract participants—largely in response to the challenges they encountered—and devoted substantially more resources to recruitment than initially planned. Recruitment strategies included: staff time dedicated to attracting participants, strategic partnerships, the creation of attractive marketing materials and reliance on engaged program participants to draw others to the program.

### EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

Each organization was committed to providing employment preparation, placement and retention support to enable young fathers to find, keep and advance in jobs. Most of the organizations focused their employment efforts on short-term job readiness training and job search assistance; limited skills training and paid transitional work were also offered. All the sites were expected to provide retention support for 12 months after participants completed the program. Sites experimented with several efforts to develop “alumni” groups—as a strategy to support the continuing development of fathers and families as well as job retention—throughout the demonstration.

### FATHERHOOD SERVICES

All sites initially based their fatherhood services on *Fatherhood Development*, a curriculum offered by the National Project for Community Leadership (NPCL)—formerly the National Center for Nonprofit Leadership and Planning—a partner in Fathers at Work.<sup>2</sup> This approach uses peer support groups and workshops to teach parenting and communication skills and to provide an outlet for “venting” and troubleshooting in a safe space with others in similar situations.

Each program defined a core set of workshops for participants to attend in order to show progress; beyond these required workshops, however, some sites reported difficulties in keeping participants engaged in this aspect of the program. In addition to providing training in fatherhood skills, the programs also worked to provide appropriate outlets for fathers to interact with their children. They also tried to help fathers build more positive relationships with the mothers of their children through mediation services and counseling with children’s mothers as well as training staff to teach team parenting.

### CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES

As part of the initiative, each organization was required to develop a formal relationship with its respective child support enforcement agency to help program participants meet their obligations. These partnerships were also seen as critical for supporting young fathers in their transition to financial stability. Variations in state child support policy and practice meant that each organization developed its own distinct partnership. Fathers at Work programs and child support agencies worked to:

- ◆ Arm fathers with accurate information about child support,
- ◆ Convince fathers of the importance of providing formal support,
- ◆ Modify child support orders,
- ◆ Set reserve or minimum child support orders,
- ◆ Consolidate petitions on multiple child support cases,
- ◆ Reduce penalties for arrears,
- ◆ Offer on-site paternity establishment, and
- ◆ Assist with other issues as needed.

Fathers at Work programs were challenged by the fact that—due to federal and state policies that limit the portion of child support that goes to families on welfare—many fathers wanted to avoid the formal system and preferred to pay informally.

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## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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While there were differences in the strategies used by participating sites, all six implemented a model that included employment, child support and fatherhood services. Findings from our evaluation suggest that this model of combined services holds promise for young noncustodial fathers and their families:

### EMPLOYMENT

- ◆ Fathers at Work participants earned \$11,025 per year at follow-up, about twice as much as comparison group fathers earned at a comparable point in time. These earnings were also \$4,602 more than Fathers at Work participants made during the year prior to enrollment in the program.

### FATHERHOOD

- ◆ The likelihood that participating fathers visited their child in the month before the follow-up survey was similar to that seen in the comparison groups and unchanged from when Fathers at Work participants entered the programs; the quality of the fathers' relationships with their children was also similar to what was reported by the comparison groups.
- ◆ Fathers at Work participants reported more arguments with the mothers of their children than did comparison group fathers. It is possible that the fatherhood workshops increased fathers' interest in and opinions about the well-being of their children, thus creating additional conflict about child-rearing issues.

### CHILD SUPPORT

- ◆ Participants with support orders in place paid an average of \$90.32 in child support in the month before the follow-up interview, significantly more than was paid by comparison group fathers with support orders in place (an average of \$38.13). Participants' payments grew significantly between baseline (about \$32 per month) and follow-up.

- ◆ The average amount of informal support—money given directly to the mother rather than through the formal child support system—reported by the Fathers at Work participants was about the same as that reported by comparison group fathers at follow-up (\$113 compared with \$112), even though the participants were paying more formal support. The percentage of Fathers at Work participants who paid informally also did not differ from the comparison group.

In sum, comparisons with similar young noncustodial fathers suggest that the Fathers at Work programs may have had a strong effect on earnings and payment of child support.

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## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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These results suggest several directions for the future of policy, programs and research related to low-income noncustodial fathers:

- 1. Public dollars could be effectively invested to provide employment and child support services, such as those provided to Fathers at Work dads, through well-established, experienced workforce organizations.** Fathers at Work participants faced a range of interrelated challenges. They knew that getting a job could enable them to provide financial support to their children, but participation in the formal economy might also trigger wage garnishment or other penalties. Fathers said they were interested in providing financial and emotional support for their children, but contentious relationships with the mothers of their children sometimes made this difficult or impossible. The Fathers at Work programs helped participants navigate these challenges. While our findings do not suggest one particular approach to providing employment or child support services, they do point to the potential of providing employment, child support and fatherhood assistance through a single community-based organization with strong linkages to public child support agencies.
- 2. Resources should be invested in strategies that help fathers access higher paying jobs.** While the finding that the fathers earned about \$5,000 more than they would have without the program is certainly significant, fathers still made only \$11,025 annually—barely above the poverty line for a family of one. These financial struggles may, in large part, be a reflection of changes in the labor market over the past several decades, including declining employment prospects for young men, fewer family-sustaining jobs that do not require at least some postsecondary education and an increase in the number of low-wage, service sector jobs. While there are not simple policy solutions, further exploration is needed to identify employment strategies that can succeed in lifting such fathers and their children out of poverty. Several of the sites experimented with some skills training and transitional jobs, but the majority of participants primarily received direct placement services and minimal job readiness training. Our research raises the question of whether a robust skills training component or subsidized work for all participants could have resulted in even stronger employment gains.
- 3. Because the findings related to fatherhood were not significant, more research is needed to understand what strategies might be most effective for improving parenting skills.** Participating in Fathers at Work did not seem to change how fathers viewed their relationships with their children or the way they reported interacting with their children. It is unclear what adjustments in strategy might be needed to

achieve more positive outcomes in these areas. While three of the Fathers at Work organizations tried to engage mothers in the programs and address issues of parental conflict, these enhancements were implemented later in the demonstration and were not a focus of service delivery. A stronger, more deliberate emphasis on both parents might yield more positive results in terms of improving parenting skills. While the Fathers at Work strategies did not appear to have an effect on fatherhood outcomes, our research suggests that there may be a role for peer support in attracting and retaining low-income men in employment programs.

- 4. States should pass through more child support money to families.** For the third of participants whose children received welfare, the additional income contributed by the father resulted in only a very small increase in the support their families received. Aware of this possibility, some fathers may have chosen to remain outside the child support system (that is, not establishing formal orders), as was demonstrated by the fact that there was no change from baseline to follow-up in the percentage of fathers with formal support orders.

While more research is needed, the evaluation of Fathers at Work suggests that such programs could make a real difference for young low-income fathers and their families. However, more than eight years after Fathers at Work was launched, most of the organizations that participated in the project have eliminated or scaled back their child support and fatherhood services. Without the specific allocation of funds, programs were unable to maintain their efforts in these areas; current funding mechanisms make it difficult to offer this intensive set of services to fathers. Given the results of this evaluation, policymakers and funders should consider new ways to support this type of programming. Legislation recently reintroduced in Congress may provide that opportunity.<sup>3</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

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- 1 In 2003, the Chicago STRIVE merged with the Suburban Joblink Corporation to form Harborquest.
- 2 *Fatherhood Development* was developed over several years—beginning in 1990—through the collaborative efforts of P/PV, MDRC and NPCL in conjunction with the Young Unwed Fathers Project and Parents’ Fair Share. In 1997, P/PV exclusively licensed the curriculum to NPCL, which is responsible for dissemination and related training.
- 3 On June 19, 2009, Senator Evan Bayh (D-IN) revived the Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act. The bill, now called the Julia Carson Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act of 2009, is cosponsored by Senators Blanche Lincoln (D-AK) and Roland Burris (D-IL). For more information, visit: <http://bayh.senate.gov/news/press/release/?id=61A8775F-8CB7-4F8B-8025-9073DFE2CC36>.



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