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Parents and Children Together: Effects of Four Responsible Fatherhood Programs for Low-Income Fathers

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OVERVIEW

Introduction

Children who are supported emotionally and financially by their fathers tend to fare better than those without such support (Adamsons and Johnson 2013; Cabrera et al. 2007; Yoder et al. 2016). Despite wanting to be strong parents, providers, and partners, many fathers struggle to fulfill these roles.

Recognizing both the importance of fathers and the challenges that they face, Congress has authorized and funded grants for fatherhood programs for more than a decade. The Office of Family Assistance (OFA), which is in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, awards and oversees these grants. ACF designed the responsible fatherhood (RF) grants to help fathers overcome barriers to effective and nurturing parenting, support their family formation and healthy relationships, and improve economic outcomes for themselves and their families (ACF 2015).

To learn more about the effectiveness of these programs, OFA funded, and ACF's Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation oversaw, a contract with Mathematica Policy Research to conduct the Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation. The PACT RF impact study was a large-scale, random assignment examination of four federally funded RF programs that received grants in 2011. This report discusses the impacts of those programs on fathers' parenting, relationships, economic stability, and well-being about one year after the fathers enrolled.

The evaluation team selected four grantees to participate in the PACT RF study: (1) Connections to Success in Kansas and Missouri, (2) Fathers' Support Center in Missouri, (3) FATHER Project at Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota, and (4) Urban Ventures in Minnesota. As required by ACF, the RF grantees offered services in three areas: (1) parenting and fatherhood, (2) healthy marriage and relationships, and (3) economic stability.

In each RF program in PACT, group-based workshops were a core service for delivering much of the required content. Facilitators in the workshops led fathers in discussions about topics such as the meaning of fatherhood, child development, co-parenting, and finding and retaining employment (Zaveri et al. 2015). Grantees based their workshops mostly on published curricula on parenting and healthy marriage, but they developed their own curricula for economic stability services. Grantees also offered individualized support to help fathers with economic stability—for example, at three of the four programs, specialized employment staff met one on one with participants. All four programs in PACT also covered personal development topics, such as coping with stress, responding to discrimination, problem solving, self-sufficiency, and goal planning.

The typical father in the PACT RF study was a disadvantaged man of color in his thirties. Of the men enrolled, 77 percent were African American, and 6 percent were Hispanic. They each had two or three children on average. Nearly half (46 percent) had children with multiple women. Before enrolling in the study, fathers' average monthly earnings were \$378, less than half the weekly earnings of the average full-time worker in the U.S. (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017).

Primary research question

The PACT RF impact study addressed the following primary research question: how does offering RF services to low-income fathers affect their parenting, co-parenting, economic stability, and well-being one year after study enrollment?

Purpose

ACF conducted the PACT RF study to produce rigorous evidence on whether offering RF services to low-income fathers can improve their outcomes. Recognizing that RF programs will continue to grow and develop, PACT seeks (1) to provide foundational information to guide funders, developers, researchers, and providers in ongoing and future program design and evaluation and (2) to build the evidence base for programming.

Key findings and highlights

Key impact findings of the project include the following:

- The RF programs in PACT improved fathers' parenting, specifically their self-reported nurturing behavior and engagement in age-appropriate activities with children. Nurturing behaviors included showing patience when the child was upset or encouraging the child to talk about his or her feelings. Depending on the age of the child, age-appropriate activities included reading books or telling stories to the child, feeding the child or having a meal together, playing with the child, or working on homework together. However, the programs did not affect the amount of in-person contact fathers had with their children or the financial support they gave them.
- The RF programs in PACT did not affect co-parenting. The fathers in the program and control groups had very similar average scores on the following scales: being a good co-parenting team, co-parenting alliance, using constructive-conflict behaviors, and avoiding destructive conflict behaviors.
- Earnings were similar for the program and control groups, but the RF programs increased the length of time fathers were continuously employed.
- The RF programs in PACT did not affect measures of social-emotional and mental well-being, such as depressive symptoms and belief in whether they could control their life circumstances instead of being controlled by external factors.

Methods

From December 2012 to March 2015, the PACT evaluation team randomly assigned 5,522 fathers who applied for one of the four PACT RF programs to either (1) a program group, which was offered RF services, or (2) a control group, which was not offered these services. Programs could serve mothers, but the evaluation team excluded female clients from the study. The control group received information about other services in the community and could choose to participate in those.

The evaluation team estimated the effects of the RF programs in PACT by comparing the outcomes of the program group with those of the control group. These estimated effects represent the difference, on average, between what actually happened to fathers who were offered RF program services versus what would have happened to them if they had not been offered these services.

To estimate the effects of the programs, the team used data from three sources: (1) baseline surveys completed by all fathers when they applied to a PACT RF program, (2) follow-up surveys conducted with the fathers about one year after study enrollment, and (3) administrative employment records collected from the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH). The baseline and follow-up surveys included questions in many areas, including parenting and economic stability. The NDNH is a national database of information about employment and earnings maintained by the Office of Child Support Enforcement.

Recommendations

The success of the PACT RF programs in improving fathers' parenting is noteworthy because fathers' experiences might make it hard for them to focus on their parenting skills. Most fathers did not live with their children and were not romantically involved with the children's mother. Although other programs have helped fathers improve their parenting, those programs typically only served fathers who were romantically involved with or married to the mothers of their children (Cowan et al. 2009; Rienks et al. 2011).

The RF programs in PACT did not improve fathers' co-parenting relationships or increase their contact with their children. Some fathers had highly conflicted or disengaged relationships with their children's mothers, making effective co-parenting particularly difficult (Friend et al. 2016). Mothers can serve as "gatekeepers," restricting access to children, so programs may need to first improve co-parenting relationships to increase fathers' contact with their children. Generally, fathers were least likely to receive content on healthy relationships relative to other topics. But they typically received more content on healthy marriage when it was part of a single workshop that integrated content from all key areas, rather than offered as a stand-alone service (Dion et al. 2018).

To increase the likelihood of improving participants' employment outcomes, RF programs may need to offer more intensive or comprehensive services than the programs in PACT offered. The programs in PACT varied in the amount of economic stability services they provided—from 2 to almost 50 hours of services, on average. However, even the most intensive services offered by the four programs in the study did not improve participants' earnings during the follow-up period. Given the number of barriers that the fathers had, some may require additional support to address underlying issues such as criminal justice involvement and substance use, which hinder their ability to get and keep a job. Future research will be needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these programming strategies.

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THE PARENTS AND CHILDREN TOGETHER RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD EVALUATION

Introduction to the Parents and Children Together Evaluation

Children whose fathers support them emotionally and financially typically fare better than those without that support. The quality of the father-child relationship is linked with, for example, children's language development, social well-being, and juvenile delinquency (Adamsons and Johnson 2013; Cabrera et al. 2007; Yoder et al. 2016). Importantly, the favorable associations are not limited to fathers who live with their children or who have higher levels of income (Adamsons and Johnson 2013; Roopnarine and Hossain 2013). For example, children who are financially supported by their nonresident fathers have better cognitive development and are at lower risk of maltreatment (Cancian et al. 2013; Choi and Pyun 2014).

Despite wanting to be strong parents, providers, and partners, many fathers struggle to fulfill these roles. More than a quarter of fathers overall and about half of unmarried fathers do not live with all of their minor children (Guzzo and Payne 2014; Stykes 2012). Not surprisingly, nonresident fathers have less contact with their children than do residential fathers (Jones and Mosher 2013). Seeing their children may not be just an issue of proximity. Contact and financial support are often linked for nonresident fathers, who tend to be worse off economically than resident fathers (Mincy et al. 2016). Fathers may have less contact with their children if they feel they are not adequately providing for them (Carlson et al. 2017; Turner and Waller 2017). In addition, mothers who are unhappy with the amount of financial support they receive might restrict fathers' access to their children (Cherlin 1992; Fagan and Barnett 2003).

ACF designed the RF grants to help fathers overcome obstacles and barriers to effective and nurturing parenting, support their family formation and healthy relationships, and improve economic outcomes for themselves and their families.

Recognizing both the importance of fathers and the challenges that many of them face, Congress has funded three rounds of grants for responsible fatherhood (RF) programs since 2006. The Office of Family Assistance (OFA), which is in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, awards and oversees these grants. ACF designed the RF grants to help fathers overcome obstacles and barriers to effective and nurturing parenting, support their family formation and healthy relationships, and improve economic outcomes for themselves and their families (ACF 2015). To help fathers achieve these goals, ACF required the programs to offer services in parenting, healthy relationships and marriage, and economic stability.

In parallel with this investment in RF programs, ACF wants to learn more about the programs' effectiveness. Prior studies of programs that served low-income fathers were limited. Most evaluations were of programs that focused on only one area of fathers' lives (such as parenting). Moreover, the research typically included few fathers and measured outcomes shortly after services ended.

To learn more, OFA funded, and ACF’s Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) oversaw, a contract with Mathematica Policy Research to conduct the Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation. PACT, which included a large-scale examination of federally funded RF programs, used a rigorous, random assignment research design. Over 5,500 fathers voluntarily enrolled in the study across four programs that received grants in 2011 (see Box 1). The evaluation team surveyed the fathers about one year after their enrollment to ask how they were doing in the areas the programs aimed to affect: parenting, healthy relationships, and economic stability.

Box 1. RF programs in the PACT evaluation

| | |
|---|---|
|  |  |
| <p>Successful STEPS, at Connections to Success (Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri)</p> | <p>Family Formation Program, at Fathers’ Support Center St. Louis (St. Louis, Missouri)</p> |
|  |  |
| <p>FATHER Project, at Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota (Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota)</p> | <p>Center for Fathering, at Urban Ventures (Minneapolis, Minnesota)</p> |

The goal of the PACT evaluation was to contribute to the growing RF field so that funders, developers, researchers, and providers can work together to learn, adapt, and improve programs. PACT included multiple components designed to support understanding of RF programs, including their effects, their operations, and how the programs fit into fathers’ lives (Box 2). The impact results from PACT are not intended to determine whether RF programs as a whole are effective, which may offer

Box 2. The PACT evaluation

The PACT evaluation is a large-scale multi-component research project intended to broaden understanding of several types of family strengthening grantees funded by ACF. Text marked with an asterisk (*) is the focus of this report.

MAIN EVALUATION COMPONENTS

- **Responsible Fatherhood programs**
 - Qualitative study of fathers
 - Implementation study of program operations
 - Impact study of program effectiveness*
- **Healthy Marriage programs**
 - Implementation study of program operations
 - Impact study of program effectiveness

SPECIAL TOPIC STUDIES

- **Responsible Fatherhood programs serving Hispanic men**
 - Study of the role of culture in program implementation
- **Programs for fathers re-entering society after incarceration**
 - Descriptive study of trauma-informed approaches to serving fathers in re-entry
- **Pathways to outcomes study of responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage programs**
 - Models hypothesizing how programs may effect change by describing and linking contextual influences and program activities to outcomes of interest

different services or serve other populations of fathers. Even so, the results do shed light on whether and how four programs affected fathers' outcomes in several areas. Recognizing that RF programming will continue to grow and evolve, PACT seeks to provide a foundation and building block in the evidence base to guide ongoing and future program design and evaluation.

The impact analysis showed that the programs in PACT succeeded in changing some aspects of fathers' parenting skills and involvement. They improved fathers' self-reported nurturing behaviors and engagement in activities with children. The programs also improved how long fathers were continuously employed. These impacts are notable successes for fathers who often face adversities and challenges but want to become more involved and supportive parents, partners, and providers.

Nevertheless, the programs did not affect other important outcomes, including the amount of contact fathers had with their children, the amount of financial support they provided to them, or co-parenting relationships. Although the programs improved the length of continuous employment, they did not affect earnings. The lack of effects in these areas suggests that more work is needed to learn how to best support fathers.

Background and research on responsible fatherhood programs

Policies and programs to promote fathers' involvement with their children have evolved since their beginnings in the 1980s. The earlier programs focused on enforcing fathers' compliance with child support orders, often through court-mandated participation (Miller and Knox 2001). These programs largely aimed to increase fathers' child support payments through job skills training (Cowan et al. 2009; Osborne et al. 2014). Later, reflecting growing evidence of the importance of both financial and emotional support (Carlson and Magnuson 2011), fatherhood programs began providing a wider range of voluntary services, such as instruction on parenting and co-parenting skills. Many programs also began working with and through other systems that involve fathers, including child support enforcement, education, and criminal justice (Avellar et al. 2011).

Although hundreds of RF programs representing a wide range of philosophies, approaches, structures, and formats have been implemented, evaluations of these programs are relatively rare.

Although hundreds of RF programs representing a wide range of philosophies, approaches, structures, and formats have been implemented, evaluations of these programs are relatively rare. The Strengthening Families Evidence Review, sponsored by ACF, identified only 13 studies of programs serving low-income fathers that used a rigorous evaluation design to estimate the effects of the programs (Avellar et al. 2011). Most of those programs focused on parenting or economic stability, but they rarely offered comprehensive services, as defined by the current legislation. The studies typically included a small number of fathers, which can limit the statistical conclusions that can be drawn. In addition, impacts were usually measured shortly after the program ended, leaving questions about longer-term effects unanswered.

Only two programs that provided services on parenting, relationships, and economic stability have been rigorously studied, with mixed results (Table 1).¹ Both programs were mandatory and designed for noncustodial parents, typically fathers. Parents' Fair Share (PFS) was a random-assignment evaluation including more than 5,500 low-income fathers (Miller and Knox 2001). The evaluation of Non-Custodial Parent Choices Peer (NCPCP), also a random-assignment design, assessed services to 330 noncustodial fathers who were unemployed or underemployed, had unpaid child support, and whose children received public assistance (Schroeder et al. 2011).

Both programs had mixed effects on child support. Although PFS increased the likelihood that fathers would make formal child support payments, it also led to a reduction in the amount of informal financial support provided to mothers. The result

was no change overall to the total dollar value of support. Findings for NCPCP did not show a clear pattern. Fathers in the program group paid child support more consistently each month than did those in the control group, but they did not pay more child support overall. Fathers in the program group were more likely to be jailed for not paying child support, perhaps because they were monitored more closely.

Neither program showed consistent effects in other areas. Neither program improved fathers’ economic stability (such as earnings or receipt of public assistance). PFS did not affect fathers’ level or quality of involvement with their children. The authors also found that PFS did not have favorable impacts on fathers’ co-parenting or relationships. Although NCPCP included services aimed at improving parenting and co-parenting, the study did not measure effects in these areas.

Table 1. Results of rigorous studies of comprehensive RF programs

| Program/ study | Study sample size and target population | Services | Length of follow-up | Key findings |
|---|--|---|------------------------------------|---|
| Non-Custodial Parent Choices Peer (Schroeder et al. 2011) | 330 noncustodial fathers who were unemployed or underemployed, had unpaid child support, and whose children received public assistance | Job search assistance, education and training, other supports (transportation assistance and funds for work-related expenses, for example); eight two-hour sessions on connecting with children, supporting their development, and co-parenting | About one year (varied by outcome) | Mixed findings (favorable and unfavorable) on paying child support; unfavorable findings on going to jail for owing child support; no effect on economic self-sufficiency |
| Parents’ Fair Share (Knox and Redcross 2000) | 5,611 low-income, noncustodial fathers | Skills training and education, job search assistance, group meetings, voluntary mediation with custodial parent, and enhanced child support enforcement (such as lowering payments during program participation) | 12 months after random assignment | Favorable effects on formal child support payments; unfavorable effects on informal child support; no effects on parenting, co-parenting, or economic stability |

Overview of PACT RF programs

The evaluation team selected four grantees to participate in the PACT evaluation: (1) Connections to Success, (2) Fathers’ Support Center, (3) FATHER Project at Goodwill–Easter Seals Minnesota, and (4) Urban Ventures. The evaluation team selected these grantees for their intensity of services, capacity for recruitment and enrollment, ability to adhere to random assignment, and absence of similar services in their areas. Although the grantees were not necessarily representative of all RF grantees in their cohort, their strengths made them strong candidates for evaluation, providing good opportunities for detecting program impacts.

In each RF program in PACT, group-based workshops were a core service for delivering much of the required content (Table 2). Facilitators in the workshops led fathers in discussions about topics such as the meaning of fatherhood, child development, co-parenting, and finding and retaining employment (Zaveri et al. 2015). Grantees based their workshops mostly on published curricula on parenting and healthy marriage, but they developed their own curricula for economic stability services (Zaveri et al. 2015).



Grantees also offered individualized support to help fathers with economic stability. Three of the grantees—Fathers’ Support Center, Connections to Success, and FATHER Project at Goodwill–Easter Seals Minnesota—had specialized employment staff who met one on one with participants. The staff’s primary responsibilities were helping fathers identify skills and interests, develop résumés, and apply for jobs (Zaveri et al. 2015). Staff in these programs worked with community employers to develop positions for program participants. For example, to develop marketable skills, unemployed fathers in the Fathers’ Support Center participated in a “job practicum,” which was similar to an unpaid internship or community service (Zaveri et al. 2015).

All RF programs in PACT covered personal development topics, although the OFA RF grant did not require that they do so. The content covered topics such as coping with stress, responding to discrimination, problem solving, self-sufficiency, and goal planning (Zaveri et al. 2015). Programs emphasized these topics in both the workshops and one-on-one services.

Table 2. Core workshop structure of PACT RF programs

| Program and grantee names, state | Core workshops | | Total workshop hours offered |
|--|---|--|------------------------------|
| | Content integration | Frequency | |
| Center for Fathering, Urban Ventures, Minnesota | Fathers could choose to participate in any or all of three separate workshops on parenting, healthy marriage, and economic stability | Weekly | 31 |
| Family Formation Program, Fathers' Support Center, St. Louis, Missouri | All content—parenting, economic stability, healthy marriage, and relationships—was integrated into one workshop | Daily for six weeks | 240 or 120 ^a |
| Successful STEPS, Connections to Success, Kansas and Missouri | The initial workshop had integrated content on employment and parenting. Graduates could then attend a separate workshop on healthy marriage and relationships. | Daily for two-and-a-half weeks (employment and parenting), followed by separate weekly workshop (healthy marriage and relationships) | 64 or 89 ^b |
| The FATHER Project, Goodwill–Easter Seals Minnesota | All participants attended a two-day orientation. Then fathers could choose among any or all of three separate workshops on parenting, healthy marriage, and a single-day employment workshop. | Two-day orientation, weekly workshops, single-day employment workshop | 63 |

^aThe Fathers' Support Center offered their integrated workshop in two formats; the workshop hours varied by format. Most fathers (73 percent) attended a daytime version for which they could receive 240 hours of core workshops. The remaining fathers (27 percent) attended an evening version and could receive 120 hours of core workshops.

^bOn November 11, 2013, Connections to Success revised the format for their fatherhood and employment workshops. The new format increased the workshop hours. Thirty-nine percent of fathers attended the program before this date; they could receive a maximum of 64 hours of core workshops. The 61 percent of fathers who attended after this date could receive a maximum of 89 hours of core workshops.

The programs differed in how they offered RF services (Table 2).² With the integrated-cohort approach used by Connections to Success and Fathers' Support Center, groups met all day every weekday over a period of weeks. In the open-entry approach that the FATHER Project at Goodwill–Easter Seals Minnesota and Urban Ventures used, services were offered as a menu. Fathers selected services of interest, although staff generally recommended that fathers begin with the parenting workshop.

Across all four programs, fathers participated in almost 45 hours of services, on average, during their first nine months after enrollment (Table 3). Programs spent the most time (20 hours, on average) covering economic stability. Hours of participation were higher in the more intensive programs using an integrated-cohort approach. Fathers at Fathers' Support Center received 88 hours of services, on average, and at Connections to Success, they received 36 hours. At the two programs that used the open-entry approach, participation was 15 hours with Urban Ventures and 20 hours with the FATHER Project at Goodwill–Easter Seals Minnesota (Dion et al. 2018).

Table 3. Average hours of content received by PACT RF program participants

| Content area | Integrated-cohort programs | | Open-entry workshop programs | | Total hours |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| | Fathers' Support Center | Connections to Success | Urban Ventures | Goodwill–Easter Seals MN | |
| Parenting/co-parenting | 11 | 11 | 6 | 7 | 9 |
| Healthy marriage/relationships | 10 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 6 |
| Economic stability | 47 | 12 | 2 | 3 | 20 |
| Personal development | 15 | 9 | 1 | 4 | 8 |
| Other | 5 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 3 |
| Total hours | 88 | 36 | 15 | 20 | 45 |
| Number of fathers | 995 | 388 | 822 | 556 | 2,761 |

Source: PACTIS/Site MIS data (Dion et al. 2018).

Note: Data show participation during the first nine months among all fathers randomly assigned to the program group. Hours include content received through either workshops or individual-level contacts. "Other" includes program orientations, setting rules for participation, and similar content.

A rigorous evaluation

Fathers who applied for one of the four RF programs in PACT were randomly assigned to a program group that was offered RF services or to a control group that was not. The control group received information about other services in the community and could choose to participate in those. As a result, the control group represented business as usual—that is, what would have happened had the RF programs not been available. Programs could serve mothers, but female clients were excluded from the evaluation.

From December 2012 to March 2015, the PACT evaluation team randomly assigned a total of 5,522 eligible fathers, who were evenly split between the program and control groups (2,761 fathers in each group). The strength of random assignment is that fathers in both research groups are likely to have very similar characteristics and circumstances before they apply for the program, on average. For that reason, a statistically significant difference between outcomes of the fathers in the program and control groups after random assignment can be attributed to the RF programs in PACT rather than to any differences in the pre-existing characteristics or circumstances in the two groups.

The evaluation team estimated the effects of the RF programs in PACT by comparing the outcomes of the program group with those of the control group. These estimated effects represent the difference, on average, between what actually happened to fathers who were offered PACT RF program services versus what would have happened to

them if they had not been offered these services. In generating these estimates, we used statistical models that adjusted for small differences in the initial characteristics of the research groups that may have arisen by chance or because of survey nonresponse. The technical supplement to this report provides more information on our statistical methods (Covington et al. forthcoming).

The study team pooled the data from the four RF programs to evaluate the overall effect of PACT RF programs. Each site was weighted equally. This approach evaluates the average effect of the programs instead of the individual effect of each of the four sites. A key reason for pooling the results was to gain statistical power to detect program effects. All else being equal, the smaller the effects that researchers are trying to detect, the larger the sample size should be. Pooling the data more accurately reflects the diversity of the RF programs as a whole. Although the four grantees were not selected to be representative, they chose different approaches for implementing the required program elements (see “Overview of PACT RF programs,” for more information). The pooled results show the average across these grantees and their different implementation approaches.

Data sources and outcomes

This report is based on data collected from three sources: (1) baseline surveys completed by all fathers when they applied to a RF program in PACT, (2) follow-up surveys conducted with fathers about one year after study enrollment,³ and (3) administrative employment records collected from the National Directory of New Hires (NDNH). The baseline and follow-up surveys included questions in many areas, including parenting, relationships, economic stability, and well-being. The NDNH is a national database of information about employment and earnings maintained by the Office of Child Support Enforcement. With multiple services, the RF programs had the potential to affect many areas of fathers’ lives. We assessed a broad range of fathers’ outcomes that aligned with the key goals and services of the programs. The outcomes are grouped in four areas: (1) parenting, (2) healthy relationships, (3) economic stability, and (4) well-being.

The study team assessed a broad range of fathers’ outcomes that aligned with the key goals and services of the RF programs in PACT.

1. **Parenting.** A central goal of the RF programs was to improve the quantity and quality of fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives. Each RF grantee that participated in PACT offered parenting and fatherhood services designed to teach fathers how to become more engaged with their children, and grantees also discussed effective parenting skills (Zaveri et al. 2015). Therefore, the main analysis focuses on aspects of father involvement and parenting skills.
2. **Healthy relationships.** The RF grantees’ healthy relationships services were designed to hone relationship skills such as communication and conflict management (Zaveri et al. 2015). Such skills can support or improve a healthy marriage or partner relationship and promote effective co-parenting. We focused

primarily on co-parenting outcomes, which most closely aligned with the fathers' situations, rather than on romantic relationships. Only half were in romantic relationships, but all were parents.

3. **Economic stability.** Across the four RF programs in PACT, fathers received about 20 hours of economic stability services, on average, the largest share of program content (Dion et al. 2018). A key element of economic stability was developing fathers' skills for finding and retaining employment so they could better support themselves and their children.
4. **Well-being.** In light of low-income fathers' often challenging circumstances and backgrounds, the RF programs in PACT were designed to support fathers' overall well-being and personal development. Curriculum content and specific activities for advancing fathers' personal development included exploring the fathers' personal values, their roles as men, and the meaning of fatherhood (Zaveri et al. 2015). Fathers could also support each other in group-based workshops. The four programs in PACT made this content part of the core services that all fathers were expected to receive, although doing so was not a grant requirement (Zaveri et al. 2015).



Although we examined multiple areas of potential effects, we restricted the number of outcomes used to assess program effectiveness. The risk of finding a statistically significant result by chance, rather than one representing a true effect of the program, increases with the number of outcomes tested. We had to balance the need to examine the range of outcomes these programs aimed to affect with the need to minimize multiple comparison concerns.

Before conducting the analysis, the evaluation team selected 15 confirmatory outcomes and 8 additional outcome measures (Table 4). A larger set of exploratory outcomes is presented in the technical appendix (Covington et al. forthcoming). We selected confirmatory outcomes that closely aligned with the grant goals and were the most likely to be effected by the program. Other outcomes were not key indicators of program effectiveness, but they could broaden our understanding of how the programs worked.

Outcomes—other than earnings and employment stability—were based on fathers’ self-reporting. Because the programs worked solely with fathers, we did not attempt to collect data from other family members. We might not have found the same pattern of impacts (favorable or otherwise) if we had used observations or included reports from the mothers or the children themselves.

We used data from two data sources for the analysis of employment outcomes: (1) sample members’ self-reports from the surveys, and (2) administrative data from NDNH on employment covered by unemployment insurance (UI). The two data sources were complementary. The survey data included fathers’ reports of all earnings from all types of work, but are subject to recall error or miscalculations. Data from NDNH are not affected by recall error or miscalculations, but do not include earnings from work that is not covered by UI, such as self-employment, part-time employment, temporary or seasonal employment, employment in certain sectors, and informal or under-the-table employment.⁴

To reduce burden on survey respondents, the study team limited more detailed questions to a single focal child and that child’s mother.

The follow-up survey included some questions about all respondents’ children and the children’s mothers. However, to reduce the burden on survey respondents, we limited more detailed questions to a single focal child and that child’s mother. For each father, the evaluation team randomly selected a focal child who met two criteria at baseline: (1) the child was younger than 21 and (2) the child lived with or had in-person contact with the father in the month before random assignment. We used these criteria for selecting the focal child to increase the likelihood that the parenting outcomes used in our analysis were appropriate. About 70 percent of fathers had at least one child who met the two criteria.

To assist the reader, this report indicates when the analysis included only fathers with a focal child. Because contact at baseline was a criterion, fathers who had the weakest relationships at baseline with all their children (and presumably, those children’s mothers) were excluded from the analyses. Fathers with a focal child tended to be somewhat better off than those without one. For example, fathers with a focal child were more likely to have worked in the past six months at baseline and had higher earnings, although they were less likely to have graduated from high school. They were also more likely to be in a steady relationship with a mother of their child(ren) and living with her. However, they were also more likely to have children with more than one woman. The estimates for the outcomes that only apply to fathers with a focal child tell us whether PACT RF programs were effective for fathers who had some in-person contact with their children

when they entered the programs. We provide more detail about how this analysis differs from the full sample analysis in the technical appendix (Covington et al. forthcoming).

Table 4. PACT RF evaluation outcomes

| Domain | Outcome | Description |
|--|---|--|
| Parenting | | |
| Father involvement (confirmatory) | In-person contact with children | Proportion of the father's biological or adopted children ages 21 and younger with whom he had in-person contact during the last month |
| | Age-appropriate activities with focal child ^a | Average of how frequently father did age-appropriate activities with the focal child in the past month, such as reading books or telling stories to the child, feeding the child or having a meal together, and playing with the child or working on homework together |
| | Average monthly financial support per child | Sum of formal child support and informal child support the father paid in the past month, plus the financial value of purchases the father made directly for the children, divided by the number of biological and adopted children up to age 22 he has with mothers to whom he is not married |
| Parenting (confirmatory) | Nurturing behaviors with focal child ^a | Average of how frequently father used nurturing behaviors with the focal child, such as showing patience when the child is upset or encouraging the child to talk about his/her feelings |
| | Nonviolent discipline of focal child ^a | Average of how frequently the father used age-appropriate, non-violent disciplinary tactics (taking away privileges or explaining why something was wrong, for example) when the focal child (ages 3–21) did something wrong |
| Child support attitudes and knowledge (additional) | Knowledge of child support system | Sum of correct responses to the following four statements: (1) "Fathers can get help with their child support by calling the child support agency"; (2) "A father has the right to ask for a change in the amount of his child support order"; (3) "A father is required to pay child support even if the mother of his child has a new partner"; and (4) "A father is required to pay child support even if the child's mother prevents him from seeing his child." |
| | Knowledge of how to request change in child support order | Whether a father with a child support order knew how to request a change in his child support order if he lost his job or earned less money |
| Healthy relationships | | |
| Co-parenting (confirmatory) | Being a good co-parenting team | Average degree to which father agreed with the following statement across all women with whom he has children: "Mother and I are a good parenting team." |
| | Positive co-parenting alliance with focal mother ^b | Average of father's responses to positive statements about co-parenting, such as working out solutions together about the focal child |
| | Positive conflict behaviors with focal mother ^b | Average of how frequently father and focal mother used constructive conflict management, such as solving differences together; includes only focal mothers with whom the father had contact in the previous month |
| | Avoidance of negative conflict behaviors with focal mother ^b | Average of how frequently the father avoided destructive conflict behaviors with the focal mother, such as getting very upset or withdrawing from an argument; includes only focal mothers with whom the father had contact in the previous month |

(continued on next page)

Table 4. PACT RF evaluation outcomes (continued from previous page)

| Domain | Outcome | Description |
|---|--|---|
| Relationship stability (additional) | Currently in a steady romantic relationship | Whether father reported being married to or in a steady romantic relationship with any of the mothers of his children |
| Economic stability | | |
| Labor market success (confirmatory) | Average monthly earnings (survey) | Average monthly earnings during the three months prior to the follow-up survey, based on survey data |
| | Average monthly earnings (administrative) | Average monthly earnings during the year after random assignment, based on administrative data |
| | Number of consecutive quarters employed in first year | Duration of the longest period of continuous employment during the first year after random assignment, calculated as the number of consecutive quarters (ranging from 0 to 4), based on administrative data |
| Housing (additional) | Lives in unstable housing | Whether the father reported being homeless, living in a halfway or group house, or living rent free in someone's home |
| | Number of moves in past year | Frequency of moves in the year before the follow-up survey |
| Perceived economic well-being (additional) | Believes better off financially now | Whether the father reported feeling better off financially now than a year ago |
| | Satisfied with current job or taking steps to improve employment | Whether the father was employed in a job or jobs with which he was (1) very satisfied, (2) taking steps to find a better job (if employed but not very satisfied), or (3) taking steps to find a job (if unemployed) |
| Well-being | | |
| Social-emotional and mental well-being (confirmatory) | Depressive symptoms | Sum of how frequently a father experienced depressive symptoms, measured by eight questions from the PHQ-8 (Patient Health Questionnaire) depression scale |
| | At risk of high or moderate depression | Whether a father was at risk for moderate to severe depression (scores of 10 or higher), measured using the PHQ-8 depression scale |
| | Feelings of external control (locus of control) | Average of father's belief that his life is controlled by external factors, judging from answers to four questions about, for example, whether he can solve problems he has or whether he feels helpless in dealing with problems |
| Criminal justice involvement (additional) | Arrested since random assignment | Whether a father was arrested since random assignment |

Note: The evaluation team used confirmatory outcomes as tests of the programs' effectiveness. These outcomes were closely aligned with the grant goals. Additional outcomes were not key indicators of program effectiveness, but they could broaden our understanding of how the programs worked.

^a Outcome was measured only for fathers with a focal child.

^b Outcome was measured only for fathers with a focal mother (that is, the mother of the focal child). Some outcomes were only appropriate for fathers who had contact with the focal mother, as indicated in the descriptions above.

Characteristics of men in the study



The typical father in PACT was a disadvantaged man of color in his thirties. Of the 5,522 fathers enrolled in the PACT study, 77 percent were African American, and 6 percent were Hispanic (Table 5). On average, participants were about 35 years of age when they enrolled in the study. Almost 70 percent had a high school diploma or GED (General Educational Development) credential and a similar proportion had worked in the past six months. Fathers in the study reported low earnings. Average earnings in the month before fathers entered the study was \$378, less than half of what the average full-time worker in the United States earns in a week (BLS 2017).

Fathers in the PACT RF study had two or three children, on average. The typical father had seen most of his children in person in the month before the study. He also provided \$187 in financial support per child each month.⁵

Fathers often had complex relationships with the mother(s) of their children. Nearly half (46 percent) had children with multiple women. About four out of five fathers were no longer romantically involved with any mother of a child they had fathered. However, fathers generally agreed that he and the mother(s) of his children made a good parenting team. The measure ranged from strongly disagreed (1) to strongly agreed (4); fathers reported an average score of 3.24.

Measures of well-being highlighted other challenges fathers experienced. When they enrolled in the study, about one out of four fathers reported experiencing symptoms consistent with moderate or severe depression (the Patient Health Questionnaire, or PHQ-8; Kroenke, Strine, Spitzer, et al. 2009). Over a third of fathers were on probation or parole when they entered the study, which may have made it difficult for them to find work.

Table 5. Baseline characteristics of fathers in the PACT RF study

| Baseline characteristic | Percentage of fathers, unless otherwise indicated |
|---|--|
| Demographics | |
| Average age | 35.4 years |
| Race and ethnicity | |
| Hispanic | 6 |
| Black, non-Hispanic | 77 |
| White, non-Hispanic | 10 |
| Other | 7 |
| Foreign born | 4 |
| Socioeconomic status | |
| Has high school diploma or GED credential | 69 |
| Worked for pay in last six months | 71 |
| Earnings in past 30 days | \$378 |
| Parenting characteristics | |
| Average number of biological and adopted children | 2.5 children |
| Children under age 22 with whom father has in-person contact | 68 |
| Has a focal child | 68 |
| Average age of focal child | 8.2 years |
| Lives with focal child | 37 |
| Average monthly financial support per child | \$187 |
| Relationships with mother(s) of child(ren) | |
| Has children with multiple mothers | 46 |
| In steady romantic relationship with any mother | 19 |
| Resides with any mother | 15 |
| Positive co-parenting relationships (scale range: 1 to 4) ^a | 3.24 on 4-point scale |
| Relationship quality with focal mother (scale range: 1 to 4) ^b | 2.71 on 4-point scale |
| Well-being | |
| Symptoms of moderate or severe depression | 26 |
| Feelings of external control (scale range: 1 to 4) ^c | 1.87 on 4-point scale |
| On probation or parole | 34 |
| Sample size | 5,522 |

Source: PACT baseline survey.

Note: The four PACT RF programs are weighted equally for these calculations.

^aThe higher the number for positive co-parenting relationships, the more strongly the father reports that he and the mother(s) of his children make a good parenting team.

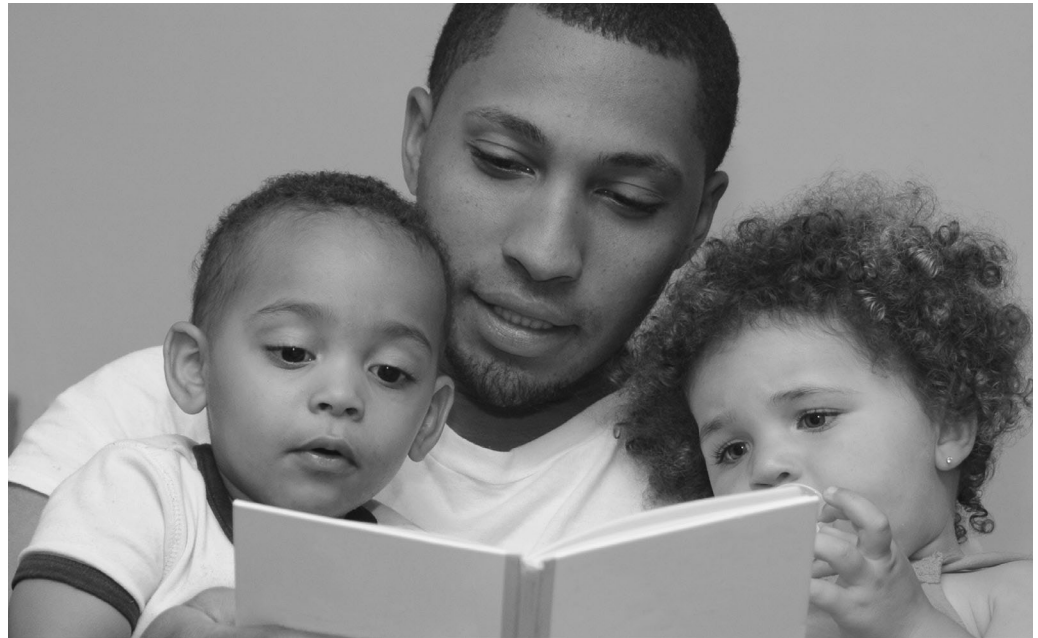
^bThe higher the number for relationship quality, the better the father's reported relationship quality with the focal mother.

^cThe higher the number for locus of control, the stronger the father reports feeling his outcomes are controlled by external forces, rather than he can affect his outcomes.

Program effects

The impact evaluation examined whether the program affected fathers' outcomes about one year after enrolling in the study.⁶ With services covering multiple topics, the programs had the potential to affect fathers' lives in multiple ways. We examined impacts in four areas: (1) parenting, (2) healthy relationships, (3) economic stability, and (4) father's well-being. PACT programs succeeded in improving outcomes in two of these areas: parenting and economic stability. The programs did not have effects on measures of healthy relationships and well-being.

PACT RF programs positively affected some parenting behaviors



A central goal of the RF programs was to improve the quantity and quality of fathers' involvement in their children's lives. The results from the impact analysis indicate that these programs had some success in this area (Table 6). Among the 70 percent of fathers in the study sample with a focal child, the programs increased fathers' engagement in age-appropriate activities with their children. Depending on the age of the child, activities included reading books or telling stories to the child, feeding the child or having a meal together, playing with the child, or working on homework together. Values on the scale ran from 0 (never) to 3 (very often). The fathers in the program group had an average score of 2.00 (somewhat often) compared to 1.87 among those in the control group, a difference that is statistically significant. This is equivalent to one in eight fathers increasing activities by one value on the four-point scale, such as increasing from once in a while to somewhat often.

The programs did not show an effect on other aspects of father involvement: contact with children and financial support. Fathers had, on average, in-person contact with

most of their children. Regardless of whether they were in the program or control group, they paid about \$160 per month in financial support for each child, on average.⁷

Table 6. Impacts of PACT RF programs on measures of father involvement, parenting skills, and knowledge of child support

| Outcome | Program group | Control group | Estimated impact | Effect |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| Father's involvement (confirmatory) | | | | |
| In-person contact with children ^a (%) | 73.1 | 71.5 | 1.5 | 0.04 |
| Age-appropriate activities with focal child ^b (scale range: 0 to 3) | 2.00 | 1.87 | 0.13*** | 0.13 |
| Average monthly financial support per child ^c (\$) | 162 | 158 | 4 | 0.02 |
| Parenting skills (confirmatory) | | | | |
| Nurturing behavior with focal child ^b (scale range: 0 to 3) | 2.56 | 2.46 | 0.09*** | 0.12 |
| Nonviolent discipline of focal child ^d (scale range: 0 to 3) | 1.96 | 1.92 | 0.04 | 0.04 |
| Knowledge of child support (additional) | | | | |
| Knows how to request change in child support order ^e (%) | 57.5 | 50.8 | 6.8*** | 0.17 |
| Knowledge of child support system ^f (scale range: 0 to 4) | 2.98 | 2.87 | 0.11*** | 0.12 |
| Sample size | | | | |
| Fathers with at least one child age 22 or younger ^a | 1,800 | 1,749 | | |
| Fathers of a focal child ^b | 1,356 | 1,386 | | |
| Fathers with at least one child age 22 or younger and is not married to the mother ^c | 1,693 | 1,643 | | |
| Fathers of a focal child age 3 to 21 ^d | 1,115 | 1,137 | | |
| Fathers with a child support order ^e | 1,169 | 1,119 | | |
| Total fathers ^f | 2,013 | 1,943 | | |

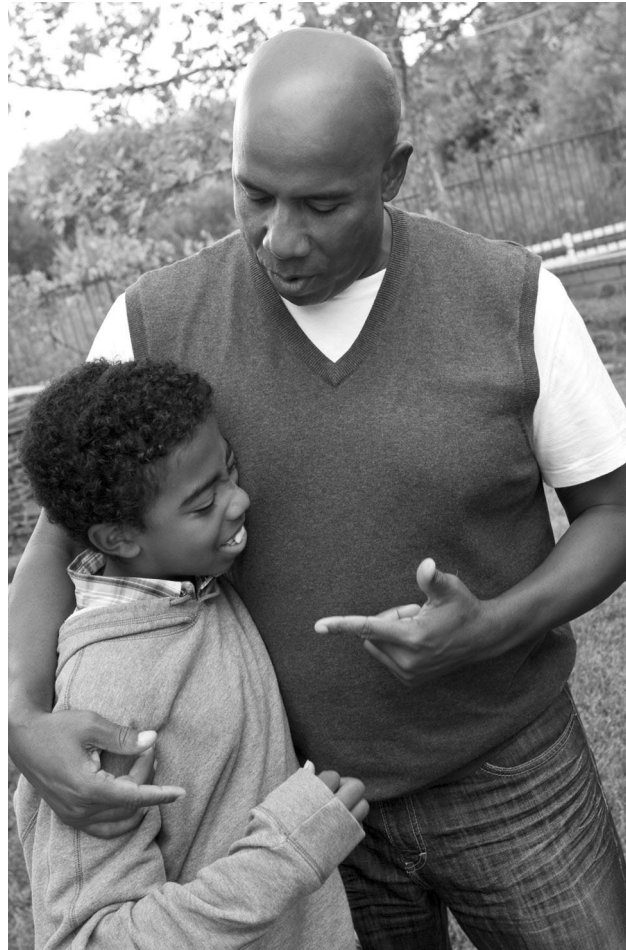
Source: PACT follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.

Note: The letter after each outcome indicates the analytic sample size, as shown in the Sample size section of the table.

***Significantly different from zero at the .01 level, two-tailed test.

The programs improved fathers' nurturing skills. Among fathers with a focal child, the programs boosted fathers' nurturing of children, such as showing patience when the child was upset or encouraging the child to talk about his or her feelings. On a scale of 0 (never) to 3 (very often), fathers in the programs averaged a score of 2.56 (between somewhat often and very often), compared with 2.46 among those in the control group, a difference that is statistically significant. This is equivalent to one in

eleven fathers increasing their nurturing behaviors by one value on the four-point scale. In contrast, fathers in both groups used age-appropriate nonviolent disciplinary tactics with similar frequencies (somewhat often).



Our additional analysis suggests that PACT RF programs improved participants' knowledge of the child support system. All four PACT RF programs established relationships with local child support offices to increase fathers' understanding of child support policies and processes and to assist them in navigating the child support system (Dion et al. 2018). When asked four questions about the child support system, fathers in the program group gave more correct answers than those in the control group did (2.98 versus 2.87). Among fathers with at least one child support order, 58 percent of fathers in the

program group reported knowing how to request a change in their order, compared with 51 percent of the control group.

Fathers in the program and control groups reported similar relationship quality with the mothers of their children

The PACT RF programs did not affect our co-parenting measures (Table 7). The fathers in the program and control groups had very similar average scores for each scale: being a good co-parenting team, co-parenting alliance, use of constructive conflict behaviors and avoiding destructive conflict behaviors. For each scale, scores indicated that fathers, on average, agreed or strongly agreed with the statements. The programs also did not show an effect on whether fathers were married to or in a steady romantic relationship with any mother of their children. About 18 percent of fathers of both groups reported being married to or in a steady romantic relationship with the mother of one of their children when they completed the follow-up survey.

Table 7. Impacts of PACT RF programs on measures of co-parenting and relationship stability

| Outcome | Program group | Control group | Estimated impact | Effect |
|---|---------------|---------------|------------------|--------|
| Co-parenting (confirmatory) | | | | |
| Being a good co-parenting team (scale range: 1 to 4) ^a | 2.80 | 2.79 | 0.02 | 0.02 |
| Positive co-parenting alliance with focal mother (scale range: 1 to 4) ^b | 2.95 | 2.93 | 0.02 | 0.02 |
| Use of positive conflict behaviors with focal mother‡ (scale range: 1 to 4) | 3.01 | 3.04 | -0.03 | -0.03 |
| Avoidance of negative conflict behaviors with focal mother‡ (scale range: 1 to 4) | 2.49 | 2.48 | 0.01 | 0.01 |
| Relationship stability (additional) | | | | |
| Currently in a steady romantic relationship with a mother of his child ^a | 18.3 | 18.5 | -0.3 | 0.01 |
| Sample size | | | | |
| Fathers ^a | 1,955 | 1,890 | | |
| Fathers with a focal mother ^b | 1,051 | 1,075 | | |

Source: PACT follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.

Note: The letter after each outcome indicates the analytic sample size, as shown in the Sample size section of the table.

None of the impacts are significantly different from zero at the .10 level, two-tailed test.

‡ Because of high attrition (missing responses) from the sample used in this analysis, there was a moderate risk of bias in these impact estimates. The sample size for these outcomes was 1,670 fathers.

Earnings were similar for both groups, but programs improved the length of time fathers were continuously employed

Average earnings were similar for fathers in the program and control groups. Based on self-reported survey data, fathers in both groups had average earnings of about \$1,000 per month during the three months before completing the follow-up survey (Table 8). Based on administrative records data, fathers in the two groups had average earnings of about \$600 per month in the year after study enrollment. Fathers' earnings were higher at follow-up than baseline, but still similar for fathers in both the program and control groups, indicating that the programs did not affect earnings.

Although there was no discernible effect on earnings, the programs did increase the length of time fathers were continuously employed. To measure continuous employment, the team examined the number of consecutive quarters fathers were employed in the year after study enrollment. Fathers in the program group worked 2.1 consecutive quarters, on average, compared with 2.0 quarters for fathers in the control group (Table 8), a difference that is statistically significant. The effect on employment



stability meant that about one of every ten fathers in the program group worked up to one consecutive quarter longer than those in the control group.

The additional analysis showed no effects on housing stability. About a third of fathers in both groups reported living in unstable housing, including being homeless, living in a halfway or group house, or living rent free in someone's home. On average, fathers in both research groups had moved about one time in the 14 months after random assignment.

The additional analysis suggested that fathers in the PACT programs felt better off financially, even though their earnings were no higher than that of those in the control group. About 54 percent of fathers in the program group reported they felt better off financially than they were a year earlier, compared with 49 percent of fathers in the control group, a difference that is statistically significant. Although the programs did not increase fathers' earnings above what they would have earned without the services, other economic stability services in the programs may have made them feel more in control of their economic situation. For example, the programs provided information on banking, budgeting, and goal setting. The programs also taught job-seeking skills, including how to develop a résumé, complete an online job application, and answer sensitive questions in a job interview, particularly questions about past felony convictions and jail time (Dion et al. 2018). Even so, the fathers in the PACT programs and fathers in the control group were equally likely to say they were either satisfied with their current jobs or trying to improve their employment situation (Table 8).

Table 8. Impacts of PACT RF programs on measures of labor market success, unstable housing, and perceived economic well-being

| Outcome | Program group | Control group | Estimated impact | Effect |
|--|---------------|---------------|------------------|--------|
| Labor market success (confirmatory) | | | | |
| Average monthly earnings ^a (survey; \$) | 1,020 | 991 | 28 | 0.03 |
| Average monthly earnings ^b (administrative; \$) | 616 | 581 | 34 | 0.04 |
| Number of consecutive quarters employed in first year ^b (administrative; range: 0 to 4) | 2.07 | 1.97 | 0.1** | 0.06 |
| Unstable housing (additional) | | | | |
| Live in unstable housing ^a (%) | 32.9 | 35.4 | -2.5 | -0.07 |
| Number of moves in past year ^a (range: 0 to 20) | 1.15 | 1.12 | 0.02 | 0.01 |
| Perceived economic well-being (additional) | | | | |
| Believes better off financially now ^a | 54.2 | 49.2 | 5.0*** | 0.12 |
| Satisfied with current job or taking steps to improve employment ^a | 90.5 | 89.5 | 1.0 | 0.07 |
| Sample size | | | | |
| Fathers (survey) ^a | 2,013 | 1,943 | | |
| Fathers (administrative data) ^b | 2,515 | 2,507 | | |

Source: PACT follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research; administrative data, the National Directory of New Hires.

Note: The letter after each outcome indicates the analytic sample size, as shown in the Sample size section of the table.

**Significantly different from zero at the .05 level, two-tailed test.

***Significantly different from zero at the .01 level, two-tailed test.

PACT RF programs did not affect measures of social-emotional and mental well-being

Fathers in the program and control groups reported similar levels of depressive symptoms (a score of 5 out of 24). They were also similarly likely to be experiencing symptoms consistent with severe or moderate depression, with about one in five in both groups giving responses on follow-up surveys indicating this risk (Table 9). These percentages are higher than those in the broader population. For example, about 8 percent of Americans age 12 and older had moderate to severe depression (Pratt and Brody 2014).

Fathers in both groups had similar beliefs in their external locus of control, or the belief that their life circumstances were a function of external factors beyond their control, rather than their own actions (Rotter 1966; Moorhead and Griffin 2004). Fathers in both groups gave responses that indicated, on average, they felt somewhat more internal, rather than external, control (score of less than 2 on a scale of 1 to 4).

There was also no program effect on whether fathers had been arrested since random assignment. When they entered the program, most fathers had previous involvement with the criminal justice system. During the 14 months after random assignment, about one in four fathers in both the program and control groups had been arrested.

Table 9. Impacts of PACT RF programs on measures of social-emotional and mental well-being, and criminal justice involvement

| Outcome | Program group | Control group | Estimated impact | Effect |
|--|---------------|---------------|------------------|--------|
| Social-emotional and mental well-being (confirmatory) | | | | |
| Depressive symptoms (scale range: 0 to 24) | 4.86 | 5.13 | -0.28 | -0.04 |
| Whether at risk of high or moderate depression (%) | 18.2 | 20.3 | -2.1 | -0.08 |
| Feelings of external control (scale range: 1 to 4) | 1.88 | 1.91 | -0.03 | -0.05 |
| Criminal justice involvement (additional) | | | | |
| Arrested since random assignment (%) | 25.6 | 26.9 | -1.3 | -0.04 |
| Sample size | | | | |
| Fathers | 2,013 | 1,943 | | |

Source: PACT follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.

None of the impacts are significantly different from zero at the .10 level, two-tailed test.

Subgroup results

Program effects may not be uniform across all participants or sites. Effectiveness may depend on who was served, where, and how. Subgroup analyses can identify variations—for example, stronger or weaker program impacts for groups with select characteristics. But by increasing the number of comparisons, subgroup analysis also increases the risk of finding statistically significant impacts by chance.

The evaluation team examined impacts on the primary measures of program effectiveness separately for the four RF programs in PACT. Before beginning the analysis, the evaluation team also identified set of subgroups that past research has suggested might be differently affected by the program or might have implications for future program operations and development (Table 10). For these subgroups, the team determined that a subgroup must show impacts on primary measures of program effectiveness in multiple domains to demonstrate a noteworthy pattern of findings.⁸ We found that no strong patterns of subgroup impacts emerged among the subgroups we examined. These results are presented in the technical appendix to this report.

Table 10. Subgroups for PACT analysis of RF programs

| Topic | Proposed subgroup | Description |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Site characteristics | Site-specific | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Center for Fathering • Family Formation Program • Successful STEPS • The FATHER Project |
| | Implementation approach | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated cohort: The Family Formation Program at Fathers' Support Center and Successful STEPS at Connections to Success • Open-entry workshop: The FATHER Project at Goodwill-Easter Seals and The Center for Fathering at Urban Ventures |
| Socioeconomic characteristics | Recent work experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No recent work experience. Time that father had most recently worked for pay was at least six months before baseline. • Recent work experience. Father was employed at baseline or worked within six months of baseline. |
| | Educational attainment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No high school diploma or GED credential. Father reported that he did not complete high school or receive a GED credential. • High school or more. Father has a high school diploma, GED credential, or more education. |
| Parenting | Multi-partner fertility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-partner fertility. Father has biological children with two or more women. • No multi-partner fertility. All of father's biological children are with one woman |
| | Contact with all children | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact with all children. Father reports contact with all of his biological or adopted children within one month of baseline. • Does not have contact with all children. Father reports that he did not have contact at baseline with at least one biological or adopted child at baseline. |
| Relationships | Quality of co-parenting with mothers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor co-parenting quality with mothers. In upper half of distribution of average responses to following questions (for all women with whom father has children): mother makes it hard to see child, relationship with mother is excellent/good/fair/poor, he and mother make a good parenting team, mother supports him in the way he wants to raise his children. • Good co-parenting quality with mothers. In lower half of distribution of average responses. |
| Well-being | Depression risk | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At risk for moderate or severe depression. Based on the PHQ-8; scores of 10 or higher indicate moderate to severe depression. • Not at risk for moderate or severe depression. Score on PHQ-8 was 9 or less. |

Fathers' Support Center had multiple positive impacts across several domains

The program at Fathers' Support Center had the strongest pattern of statistically significant effects when examined separately (Table 11). Fathers' Support Center had statistically significant effects on parenting, co-parenting, and well-being, after adjusting for multiple comparisons. We conducted additional tests (not shown) comparing the impacts of Fathers' Support Center with the combined impacts of the three other sites. The results showed that Fathers' Support Center had a statistically greater impact on two measures of co-parenting: using constructive conflict behaviors and avoiding destructive ones.

This program also provided substantially more hours of services than the other three PACT RF sites.⁹ Among all fathers randomly assigned to the program, those at the Fathers' Support Center received 88 hours of services, on average (Dion et al. 2018). The average across the other three sites was 24 hours. Given the difficulty of change and the challenges many fathers in the program experience, we might expect that intensive services were needed to achieve impacts. The patterns tentatively confirm this hypothesis.

Table 11. Site-level impacts of RF programs in PACT

| | Fathers' Support Center | Connections to Success | Urban Ventures | Goodwill–Easter Seals MN |
|--|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| Father involvement | | | | |
| In-person contact with children | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Age-appropriate activities with focal child | +++ | ○ | ++ | ○ |
| Average monthly financial support per child | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Parenting skills | | | | |
| Nurturing behaviors with focal child | ++ | ○ | + | ○ |
| Nonviolent discipline of focal child | ++ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Co-parenting | | | | |
| Being a good co-parenting team | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Positive co-parenting alliance with focal mother | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Positive conflict behaviors with focal mother | ++ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Avoidance of negative conflict behaviors with focal mother | +++ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

(continued on next page)

Table 11. Site-level impacts of RF programs in PACT
(continued from previous page)

| | Fathers' Support Center | Connections to Success | Urban Ventures | Goodwill–Easter Seals MN |
|--|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| Labor market success | | | | |
| Average monthly earnings | o | o | o | o |
| Average monthly earnings, administrative data | o | o | o | o |
| Number of consecutive quarters employed in first year, administrative data | ++ | + | o | o |
| Social-emotional and mental well-being | | | | |
| Depressive symptoms | ++ | o | o | o |
| At risk of high or moderate depression | +++ | o | o | o |
| Feelings of external control | + | o | o | ++ |

o No statistically significant impact.
 +++/++/+ Statistically significant positive impacts at the .01/.05/.10 level.
 ---/--/- Statistically significant negative impacts at the .01/.05/.10 level.

The impact evaluation showed program successes in parenting and employment stability, but also areas in which programs could improve, including earnings and co-parenting relationships.

Discussion

The PACT RF programs funded by OFA covered wide-ranging content in their services to improve the human condition of low-income fathers and their children. As a result, the programs had the opportunity to affect the fathers in multiple ways. The impact evaluation showed program successes in parenting and employment stability, but also areas in which programs could improve, including earnings and co-parenting relationships.

The effects of the programs should be considered within the broader context of fathers' lives. Fathers in the PACT evaluation faced multiple adversities that challenged their aspirations to be more involved parents, better providers, and stronger partners (Dion et al. 2018). The fathers in the programs often described “rough” lives filled with painful experiences, starting in childhood and including abuse when they were growing up, as well as the lack of any positive father figure (Dion et al. 2018). As adults, the fathers continued to experience chronic stress and trauma, such as dealing with perceived discrimination, economic and housing instability, and being marginalized as important in their children’s lives (Dion et al. 2018). These experiences could contribute to and compound many of the challenges fathers had at the time they entered the program, including low wages, being disconnected from some of their children, and past involvement with the criminal justice system. Furthermore, such a context may make change, which is always difficult, even more so.

Improving parenting and co-parenting

The programs improved fathers' self-reported nurturing behavior and engagement in age-appropriate activities with children. These findings align with what we know about program implementation. PACT RF programs emphasized parenting, either integrating it into core workshops or recommending that fathers attend parenting services first (Zaveri et al. 2015).

Although most fathers did not live with their children and were not romantically involved with the children's mother, most fathers were able to internalize and implement the parenting information and lessons.

These favorable findings are especially encouraging because fathers in the PACT evaluation may not be well positioned to capitalize on parenting services. Most fathers did not live with their children and were not romantically involved with the children's mother. And yet, fathers in the PACT RF programs—at least the 70 percent of them who had some level of contact with their children at baseline—were able to internalize and implement the parenting information and lessons. Although other programs have helped fathers improve their parenting, those programs typically only served fathers who were romantically involved with or married to the mothers of their children (Cowan et al. 2009; Rienks et al. 2011).

The programs did not affect the proportion of children with whom the fathers had contact. Most fathers were in contact with most or all of their children, which leaves little room for improvement. However, the services may not have provided what fathers needed to increase their involvement with their children. Although fathers found the parenting content helpful, many had hoped for greater support in gaining access to their children, such as free or reduced-price legal representation for parenting time, visitation, or custody agreements (Dion et al. 2018). The legislation did not authorize programs to use grant funds for legal representation, although two grantees—Fathers' Support Center and FATHER Project at Goodwill Easter Seals-Minnesota—partnered with other agencies to provide legal advice using separate funding.

The programs did not affect the quality of fathers' relationships with the mothers of their children. Improvements in fathers' relationships with mothers may be a necessary precursor for fathers to be able to see their children more often. Mothers can act as the gatekeeper, controlling nonresident fathers' access to the child (Cherlin 1992; Fagan and Barnett 2003). Most of the fathers were not romantically involved with the mothers of their children, and some had highly conflicted or disengaged relationships with them (Friend et al. 2016), making effective co-parenting particularly difficult. In-depth interviews with a subset of fathers in the programs confirmed that many felt their co-parenting relationships had not improved since entering the program (Friend et al. 2016).

One step programs could consider is to integrate co-parenting and healthy relationship skills with other core program content. Fathers' Support Center was the only PACT RF program that integrated this content into its core programming; the other three

offered the healthy marriage and relationship content as a standalone service (Dion et al. 2018). Integrating these services into other workshops may have contributed to the much higher average level of healthy relationship content that fathers received from Fathers' Support Center, an average of ten hours compared to one to five hours across the other PACT RF programs (Dion et al. 2018). Exploratory analysis suggested that Fathers' Support Center had a larger effect on fathers' ability to manage conflict with co-parents than the other PACT RF programs did. The program's ability to deliver more healthy relationship services may have contributed to this larger effect. Exposing fathers to more co-parenting or healthy relationship content—and increasing the likelihood of improving their outcomes in this area—may require programs to fold this material into a workshop that fathers may be more inclined to attend, such as one covering economic stability or parenting.

Programs could also consider offering some services that included mothers, such as certain workshops or mediator services. A mediator as a neutral third party, for example, could work with both parents to come to mutually agreed decisions (e.g., parenting time agreements) or action steps to coordinate their parenting. Programs would need to think carefully about how to engage mothers—who would otherwise be uninvolved with the program and perhaps estranged from the father—to attend. For example, programs might offer incentives, such as grocery store gift cards, or limit services to parents who had some contact with each other.

Improving fathers' economic stability and well-being

The PACT RF programs led to a modest increase in employment stability, as measured by the number of consecutive quarters fathers were employed during the year after study enrollment.

The PACT RF programs led to a modest increase in employment stability, as measured by the number of consecutive quarters fathers were employed during the year after study enrollment. Research suggests that employment stability, rather than simply employment status, is related to levels of nonresident father involvement (Fagan et al. 2009). Moreover, employment stability could result in higher earnings—if fathers are employed longer overall or receive raises—which may in turn improve fathers' financial support of their children. Further, fathers may increase their contact and engagement with their children once they are able to support them financially (Nepomnyaschy 2007; Turner and Waller 2017).

The effect on employment stability, however, did not translate to improvements in earnings or fathers' financial support of their children in the year after random assignment. The effect on earnings could take more time to appear, if, for example, fathers received a raise only after a more extended period of time. To assess whether an improvement in earnings came later, we examined earnings two years after random assignment for approximately 80 percent of the sample for which we had data (Covington et al. forthcoming). The longer-term follow-up also did not show a statistically significant effect on earnings. Prior research has shown that it can be very difficult to increase earnings among low-income adults. Among programs designed

to improve employment for low-income adults, few had favorable effects on earnings (Sama-Miller et al. 2016). Most existing research is about programs for women, with less information on the effectiveness of employment and training programs for low-income men (Mastri and Hartog 2016).

The fathers in PACT had a number of barriers to economic stability, including elevated risk of depression, criminal records, and substance use, which perhaps made it more difficult to improve their economic well-being. About a year after they entered the study, about 20 percent of fathers reported symptoms consistent with moderate or severe depression, compared with about 8 percent of the general population (Pratt and Brody 2014). The PACT RF services were not enough to move the needle on depressive symptoms or on whether fathers felt they were in control of their lives.

In addition, almost all of the fathers in the PACT sample had been arrested at baseline, and most had been convicted of a crime (Dion et al. 2018). The programs did not affect the likelihood of being arrested during the 14 months after entry into the study. A criminal record decreases the likelihood of getting a job interview or receiving a job offer after submitting a job application (Pager 2007; Pager et al. 2009). Moreover, the negative effect a criminal record has on employment may be larger for African American men than for other men (Pager et al. 2009).

Given the number of barriers that the fathers had, some may require additional support to address underlying issues such as criminal justice involvement and substance use, which hinder their ability to get and keep a job.

RF programs may want to offer more intensive or comprehensive services to increase the likelihood of improving participants' employment outcomes. The PACT programs varied in the amount of economic stability services they provided. Fathers at three of the programs received 2 to 12 hours on average, whereas at Fathers' Support Center they received almost 50 hours of economic stability services, on average. Even so, the intensive employment services offered by Fathers' Support Center did not improve participants' earnings in the follow-up period. Given the number of barriers that the fathers had, some may require additional support to address underlying issues such as criminal justice involvement and substance use, which hinder their ability to get and keep a job. The ACF-sponsored Building Bridges and Bonds evaluation is testing a cognitive behavioral intervention designed to help fathers with criminal records find and retain better jobs. The results may provide valuable insights for how to better support these fathers.

Some fathers in PACT struggled with substance use disorders (Dion et al. 2018). Programs and future research may need to consider the connections between substance use and RF program outcomes. RF programs funded by OFA cannot directly fund treatment for substance use disorders. RF programs may want to establish partnerships with treatment providers for services and data sharing. For example, RF programs could refer fathers to services, track their progress in the treatment program, and work with the partner agency to understand when fathers may be ready to look for a job.

Some preliminary evidence suggests that focusing on fathering can also benefit substance abuse treatment. More specifically, focusing on the fathering role as a motivator for change may increase the likelihood that fathers complete substance abuse treatment and improve their satisfaction with the services, relative to fathers who receive individual drug counseling (Stover 2015). Thus, pairing or integrating services for responsible fatherhood and substance abuse treatment could be beneficial for both types of services.

Closing thoughts

ACF conducted PACT to contribute to the growing RF field so that funders, developers, researchers, and providers can work together to learn, adapt, and improve programs. The programs in PACT showed promise for enhancing aspects of fathers' lives, and potentially the lives of their children, through improvements in parenting quality. The evaluation also showed areas which were not impacted, that may need further development. The findings from this evaluation may help the programs adapt to serve fathers and children more effectively.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Another relevant ACF-sponsored, random-assignment evaluation is currently underway. The Evaluation of National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration Projects (CSPED) is assessing the effectiveness of programs offered by state child support agencies to provide employment, parenting, and child support services to non-custodial parents who are having difficulty meeting their child support obligations. Results from this evaluation will be available in 2019.
- ² Grantees were not required to use either approach; other RF programs may use different approaches.
- ³ The follow-up survey was designed as a 12-month follow-up, but the average length of time between the first and second surveys was 14 months. The project team continued reaching out to some fathers who did not respond immediately to maximize the number of responses.
- ⁴ There is also evidence that employers have incentive to underreport earnings for UI purposes. See Moore et al. (forthcoming) for more information about comparing impacts measured based on survey reports and administrative records.
- ⁵ This analysis excludes children if the father was married to their mother.
- ⁶ Although the follow-up survey was designed as a 12-month follow-up, the average length of time between the first and second surveys was 14 months.
- ⁷ The analysis of program effects included fathers who completed the follow-up survey. Baseline characteristics (in the previous section) included all randomly assigned fathers.
- ⁸ This standard required statistically significant differences between the subgroup impacts in at least two domains after adjusting for the number of outcomes examined in each domain.
- ⁹ Although we classified both the Fathers' Support Center and Connections to Success as integrated cohort approaches, the Fathers' Support Center delivered substantially more hours of services than Connections to Success (88 versus 36, respectively).

