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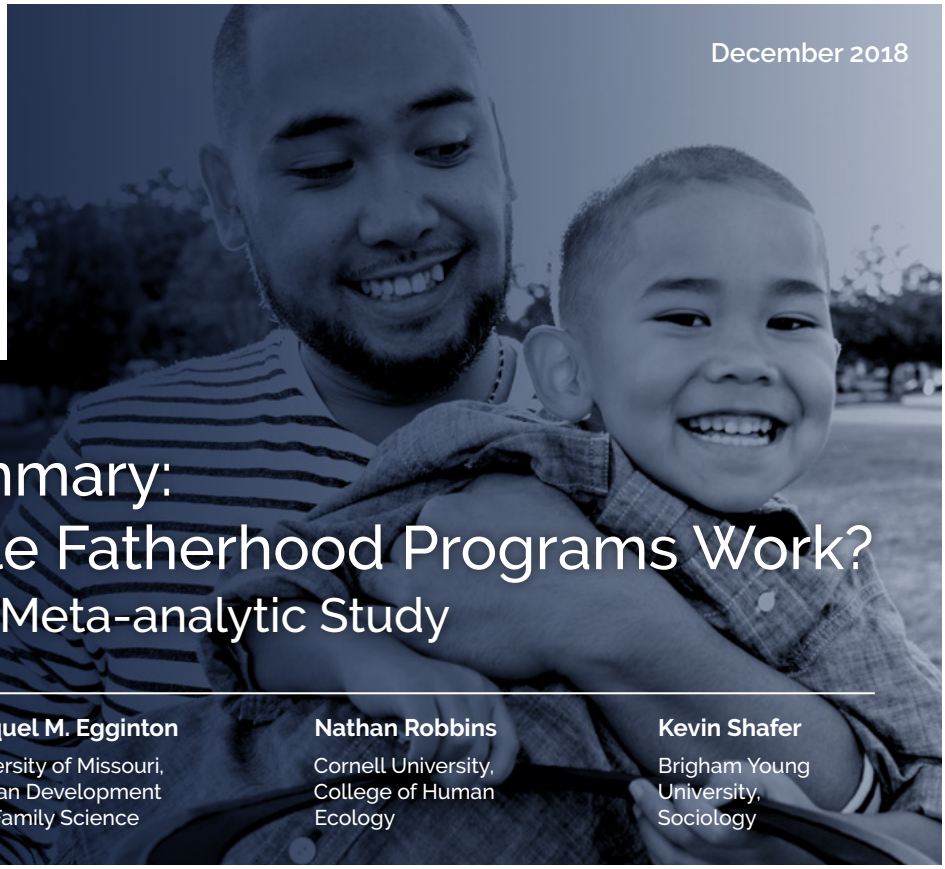

# Executive Summary: Do Responsible Fatherhood Programs Work?

## A Comprehensive Meta-analytic Study


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Responsible fatherhood (RF) programs for unmarried and nonresident fathers have increased in number and scope over the past decade. The current report highlights the results of a comprehensive meta-analysis of responsible fatherhood program evaluation studies. We ask: How effective are responsible fatherhood programs at increasing unmarried, low-income, non-resident fathers' positive father involvement, parenting, coparenting behavior, employment, economic prospects, and child support payments?

To conduct our search, we used academic databases including those reporting dissertations and theses, sought out potential evaluation reports not published in academic outlets, and combed through reference sections of articles and reports for other studies that we may have missed. This search process returned 750 research reports. From this list, we identified 270 primary research reports evaluating fathering programs targeting unmarried, never married, and low-income fathers. As is normally the case in meta-analysis, only a fraction of the potential reports we identified met our inclusion criteria. Despite identifying 270 potential reports in our initial search, only 28 were appropriate to be included in our meta-analysis. Two of these reports used the same sample, so they were collapsed into one study ($k$ = 27); five other reports employed multiple independent treatment groups, so these were coded as independent studies ($k$ = 7). Thus, of the 28 reports, 34 independent studies were identified for coding. Of these,


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24 employed a control/treatment design, and 10 employed a one-group/pre-post design. We focus here on the major findings from the more rigorous control/treatment designs.

We coded for a wide range of outcomes, ultimately aggregating outcomes into five categories: father involvement (e.g., any interaction the father had with the child), parenting (e.g., skills developed in regards to positive parenting), coparenting (e.g., cooperation with the mother and the father-mother relationship quality), father employment and economic well-being (e.g., administrative data tracking quarterly wages, employment status, and increase in paid work hours), and payment of child support (e.g., formal and informal payments, administrative data on arrears and payment of arrears). Only one study evaluated program effects on child outcomes (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999), so we cannot include an aggregated report here.

We came away with two major findings. First, based on the current data available to us using control-group designs, these programs produce small but statistically significant effects for the populations they serve. However, when exploring the effects more specifically, we found that only father involvement, parenting, and coparenting were significantly impacted. The strongest effect size was in coparenting skills. This was particularly encouraging, as the coparenting relationship is one of the most important predictors of nonresident father involvement. Unfortunately, these programs did not significantly impact father employment and economic well-being, nor did they significantly impact father payment of child support.

A second general conclusion from our meta-analysis is that there is a continued need for evaluation of these fatherhood programs, especially work focused on unmarried, nonresident, low-income fathers. Evaluation work in this field lags behind a significant amount of basic research on fathers, and also lags behind other types of evaluation work in this field.

In addition, there are needed improvements in the quality of evaluation research. For example, we found a need for improved statistical reporting (e.g., means, standard deviations, and sample sizes for the control group and any treatment groups over time), and a need for more mixed-methods studies instead of qualitative only evaluations. We also identified a need for reports of attrition, assessment of child outcomes, and observational measures of outcomes, along with a need for future studies to include moderators such as the age of fathers, the location of the program (e.g., inside versus outside U.S.), the target child's developmental stage, the number of children a father has, multi-partner fertility, and other barriers to father involvement such as incarceration history and employment history (when not included as an outcome being assessed). Finally, few studies followed fathers for significant periods of time after completing the interventions to examine whether program effects deteriorated (or grew) over time.

In conclusion, though RF programs for low-income, unmarried, nonresident fathers are having a small, statistically significant effect on fathers, we still have more work to do to evaluate our efforts and to increase the impact of these programs. We hope this meta-analytic review will spur and inform more work in this important area.