# Fatherhood | Research | & Practice | Network |

# Summary Report: Considering Contextual Influences on Fatherhood Program Participants' Experiences in Alabama

**Francesca Adler-Baeder, PhD (Principal Investigator)**
*Auburn University, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Professor*

**Julianne McGill, PhD**
*Auburn University, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Assistant Research Professor*

**Ami Landers, MS**
*Auburn University, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Project Manager*

**Rachel Odomes, BS**
*Auburn University, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Research Assistant*

**Alexander Chan, PhD**
*University of Maryland, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 4-H Youth Development Educator*

# Introduction

Currently, hundreds of fatherhood programs are active across the nation. Despite the prevalence of fatherhood programs, evaluation of these programs is still in the early stages. There are some recent published studies of the efficacy of these programs in regards to enhanced economic stability and individual well-being of fathers, as well as enhanced father involvement with their children and better coparenting relationship quality. Findings are somewhat mixed; therefore, evaluation studies that replicate and extend the efforts to document program benefits serve to strengthen the research base for these programs. In particular, process evaluations can provide information on factors that influence change among participants and their families. This more nuanced information is useful to program directors and facilitators, particularly since a diverse group of fathers in various settings participate in programs with different designs.

The purpose of our study of a large group of fathers participating in fatherhood programs across Alabama was to assess the average changes in target outcomes over a one-year period as well as to explore variations in retention and in outcomes within the group based on the geographic setting of the programs (rural or urban), the sequencing of services (case management and parenting classes), and the race of the father. We also consider these in combination.

## Contextual Influences on Fatherhood

Scholars have noted the need for studies that assess program outcomes across a variety of environmental contexts (Osborne et al., 2014). Rural areas contain a markedly different array of both individual challenges and available job opportunities compared to urban areas. Economic barriers such as underemployment and unemployment may be more prevalent in rural areas (Mushinski, Bernasek, & Weiler, 2015) and may be related to greater difficulty in fathers' ability to provide adequate support to their children (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Research also finds differences in social support between urban and rural communities (Lemke et al., 1992), noting rural residents tend to have fewer interpersonal contacts and a greater likelihood for intrapersonal challenges. In a 2005 study on fathers residing in rural areas, Anderson and colleagues assessed a Responsible Fatherhood program in which 56% of participants reported depressive symptoms (Anderson, Kohler, & Letiecq, 2005).

Taken together, there is empirical rationale for expecting that rural and urban fatherhood program participants may begin their programs with distinct sets of challenges and that differences in the social and economic fabric of rural and urban areas may influence post- program outcomes.

## Cultural Influences on Fatherhood

We also assumed, based on an eco-cultural theoretical perspective (Phenice, Griffore, Hakoyama, & Silvey, 2009), that individual culture may influence program participation, baseline levels of functioning, and outcomes and explored variations by race. Research indicates Black and minority fathers may experience greater challenges related to economic stability, suggesting that Black fathers may be especially prone to enter fatherhood programs with economic challenges and face greater challenges in improving their economic condition. There are also some indications that father involvement differs by race. To date, no study has explored differences in change or growth trajectories for fatherhood program outcomes by race, although there have been a handful of studies that have assessed program outcomes within specific racial subgroups (e.g., Latino fathers, Concha, Villar, Tafur-Salgado, Ibanez, & Azevedo, 2016; Black fathers, Roy & Dyson, 2010). In addition, we consider the intersectionality of race and geographic setting since this has not been explored in previous studies of fatherhood programs.

## Programmatic Differences in Fatherhood Programs

Further, fatherhood programs vary greatly in design (Dion, Zaveri, & Holcomb, 2015; Pearson, 2018). We noted that programs in our state varied in their sequencing of the main services offered to fathers: the 24/7 Dad® and Together We Can program curriculum classes and case management (one-on-one needs assessment and plan development for other services needed and oversight of those services). The somewhat arbitrary factors that typically determined order of parenting/coparenting classes first or case management first (e.g., next class series start-date relative to father's enrollment in the program), allowed us to explore comparative benefit of one plan over another. This implementation design question was also of interest to community agencies offering the programs. Thus, this exploratory study also focused on program implementation variations that may contribute to their effectiveness.

## Current Study Aims

Specifically, our goals were:

**Aim 1:** Examine whether participants report similar functioning and challenges upon program entry based on geographic location, race, and the interaction of geographic location and race.

**Aim 2:** Test whether participants report improvements in the desirable direction in multiple target outcomes related to enhanced child and family well-being, parenting practices, relationships, and family strengths immediately following program participation, six months later, and one year later.

**Aim 3:** Examine the influence of geographic location, race, and the interaction of geographic location and race on levels of improvements in target outcomes immediately following program participation, six months later, and one year later.

**Aim 4:** Explore the influence of geographic location, race, the interaction of geographic location and race, and sequencing of program services on participants' retention and completion.

**Aim 5:** Explore the influence of sequencing of program services on levels of improvements in target outcomes immediately following program participation, six months later, and one year later.

**Aim 6:** Understand whether and how stigma associated with fatherhood program participation influences levels at program entry and improvements in target outcomes.

**Aim 7:** Qualitatively explore the experiences of fatherhood program participants to gain insight into their perception of the role of the father, benefits of the program, and how their geographic location influences program participation and being a father.

Based on previous research, we hypothesized that rural fathers would report comparatively greater challenges and lower levels of baseline functioning (Aim 1). We also expect positive growth in the target outcome areas, on average (Aim 2). The remaining questions we examined are largely exploratory; therefore, hypotheses were not specified.

## Method

In partnership with the Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention and the Alabama Department of Human Resources, we recruited 630 nonincarcerated and noncustodial fathers in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families-funded fatherhood programs across 20 sites to participate in the study. Our sample included a majority of Black fathers (60%). The sample was mostly urban (81%), with approximately 19% of participants located in rural areas. The average age of fathers was 36.5 years, and the majority of the fathers were not currently married (72%). The majority were low income; specifically over half (52%) reported being unemployed with no monthly income at baseline assessment.

Fathers were invited to participate in the study if they were not currently incarcerated and were a noncustodial father participating in a fatherhood program. Fatherhood respondents completed intake surveys prior to program participation to assess demographic information and challenges. At the conclusion of program services, participants completed retrospective pre/post surveys, which simultaneously assessed retrospective pre- and post-program reports of outcome measures. The research team utilized contact information provided by the partnering agencies to gather six-month and one-year follow-up surveys. Because we utilized retrospective pre/post surveys that assess baseline and immediate post-program reports at the same data collection time, all fathers ($n$ = 630) included in the study provided retrospective reports of baseline functioning and functioning immediately post-program. Of those, 268 participants (42.5%) of the sample provided data at the six-month follow-up and 268 participants (42.5%) provided one-year follow-up data. Over half (52.9%), or 333 individuals, of fatherhood participants in the study provided retrospective pre-program, post-program, and six-month, and/or one-year follow-up data.

Each of the 15 outcomes of interest in the current study are linked with individual, relational, and family well-being for fathers and children and consistent with assessments in other fatherhood program evaluations (Fagan & Kaufman, 2015). Theoretically, the Protective Factors model developed by the Strengthening Families™ program (Browne, 2014; CSSP, 2018) used by child abuse prevention agencies aligns well with target outcomes for fatherhood programs (Fagan & Kaufman, 2015; James Bell Associates, 2010). The SFP emphasizes five critical protective factors: *parent/ family resilience, social connections, knowledge of parenting and child development, social and emotional competence of children,* and *concrete support in times of need*. Thus, the outcomes of interest in our study are considered both factors related to enhanced father involvement, economic security, and individual and family well-being, and also as deterrents to child maltreatment.

# Results

*Baseline Differences*

Utilizing an ecocultural lens, we explored retrospectively reported baseline differences in subgroups of fathers in order to inform program providers and researchers on the potential for greater needs at the start and differing trajectories of change based on context and culture (Phenice, et al., 2009). We find some distinctions worth noting.

(1) Rural fathers reported higher levels of *coparenting conflict* compared to urban fathers, but reported higher levels of *conflict management skills*.

(2) Urban fathers reported greater challenges compared to rural fathers in *not having a steady place to live, living situation, living too far from children*, and *incarceration*.

(3) Black and other minority fathers report greater *communication skills, hope, and positive parenting behaviors* compared to White fathers.

(4) Black and other minority fathers report greater challenges compared to White fathers in *unemployment, transportation,* and *not enough money for child support, bills, children,* and *food*.

(5) White fathers report greater challenges compared to Black and other minority fathers in *drug and alcohol abuse, incarceration,* and *working too many hours*.

(6) White rural fathers report higher levels of *commitment to pay child support* compared to Black and other minority rural fathers (but did not differ from other groups).

(7) White rural fathers reported more *difficulty and trouble with child(ren)'s mother* compared to White urban fathers (but did not differ from other groups).

(8) Black and other minority urban and rural fathers and White rural fathers reported more difficulty compared to White urban fathers in *being unable to pay child support.*

*Average Change in Outcomes*

Our assessment of fatherhood program participants' improvements yielded encouraging findings that suggest the immediate and longer-term influence of program participation on multiple, key indicators of individual and family well-being for the average participant. Using growth modeling procedures, we determined that fathers reported sustained growth over one year in 14 of 15 distinct target outcomes. On average, fathers did not report significant growth in feelings of *economic stability* over the one year. The specific indicators where fathers demonstrated significant growth over a one-year period of time are:

*Protective Factor: Social Connections and Skills*

(1) relationship stability
(2) *communication skills*
(3) *conflict management skills*
(4) *coparenting conflict*
(5) *dating abuse prevention skills*

*Protective Factor: Parent/Family Resilience*

(6) *hope for the future*

*Protective Factor: Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development*

(7) *positive parenting behaviors*

(8) *father involvement*

(9) *parent-child relationship quality*

*Protective Factor: Social and Emotional Competence of Children*

(10) *child academic adjustment*

*Protective Factor: Concrete Support in Times of Need?*

(11) *financial responsibility*

(12) *commitment to cooperative with child support staff*

(13) *commitment to pay full child support*

(14) *monthly income*

Fathers also improved their *job status*, with a statistically significantly larger proportion in part-time and full-time work at six months and at one year than at program start.

*Contextual and Cultural Differences.* We find some evidence of greater benefit of programs based on geographic location, race, and the interaction of geographic location and race:

(1) Urban fathers report greater improvements compared to rural fathers in *hope* and *economic stability* in the short term, *conflict management skills, communication skills,* and *positive parenting behaviors* in the interim (six-month follow-up); rural fathers reported greater reductions in *coparenting conflict* in the interim (six-month follow-up), and long term (one-year follow-up).

(2) Black and other minority fathers report greater improvements compared to White fathers in the short term in *communication skills* and *commitment to cooperate with child support personnel.*

(3) White fathers compared to Black and minority fathers report greater improvements in *financial responsibility, economic stability, positive parenting behaviors,* and *dating abuse prevention skills* in the interim (six-month follow-up), and *communication skills* and *hope* in the interim (six-month follow-up) and long term (one-year follow-up).

(4) In the short term, White rural fathers did not report improvements in *commitment to pay full child support* compared to all other subgroups who did experience improvements.

(5) At the six-month mark, rural Black and other minority fathers did not report improvements in *communication skills* compared to all other subgroups who did experience improvements

*Programmatic Differences.* Contextual variables influenced program attendance and completion rates. In addition, sequencing of services was related to some difference between groups:

(1) Rural fathers attended more classes on average.

(2) White fathers attended more classes and had a comparatively higher completion rate than Black and other minority fathers. White urban fathers had higher completion rates than other groups.

(3) Receiving case management first enhanced fathers' attendance and completion rates.

(4) Those in case management first reported greater improvements in *parent-child relationship quality, financial responsibilit*y, and *hope for the future* in the short term.

(5) Those who received class content first reported greater interim and long-term growth in *financial responsibility*.

## Practical Implications

First, we provide validation that a diverse group of fathers served in fatherhood programs in diverse settings experienced, on average, changes sustained for up to one year in many target areas related to family strengthening and protection of children for maltreatment. This is quite impressive for an educational program with support services. We also find positive growth in areas, such as coparenting and monthly income, that were not evident in other studies (e.g., Avellar, et al., 2018). The emphasis in our sites on healthy relationship skills may help explain this difference, as sites in other studies provide this information as optional services. Regarding subpopulations, it appears that rural fathers, particularly White rural fathers, may benefit from added attention to couple, coparenting, and parent-child relationships and that urban fathers and Black fathers may benefit from added attention to practical and economic/employment challenges at program start, while Black and rural fathers may benefit from added supports related to economic challenges following program participation. This finding of enhanced economic vulnerability, even after program participation, for Black and rural fathers was in line with our expectations and calls for added attention to the reduction of institutional barriers to employment and economic self-sufficiency for these fathers.

Our results from examining the influence of sequencing of services suggest that it may positively affect class attendance rates for fathers to receive case management first. While it does not appear to be essential for program effectiveness, it may provide the opportunity to connect better with program staff and to initially address more pressing, practical needs. The additional finding that financial responsibility was enhanced over time if case management services were provided after classes also suggests that a program design that includes some post-program case management, in addition to pre-program case management, may be the ideal method for service delivery. Future research can explore the comparative effectiveness of this program approach.

## Conclusions

The current study adds to the growing research base on fatherhood programs in several ways and provides some useful information to inform models of best practice in the field. Among a large group of diverse fathers participating in fatherhood program across 20 sites in a southern state, we find evidence of significant growth over a one-year period in multiple areas related to family strengths that serve as protective factors for children (Browne, 2014): social connections, parent/family resilience, parenting skills and child development knowledge, child social and emotional competence, and concrete supports in times of need. Further, we found some evidence of variations in start points and change patterns based on geographic setting and race and program service sequencing. This information serves to inform practitioners' and policy-makers' efforts to better meet the needs of diverse fathers and families through added attention and support in areas of specific vulnerability.

Our hope is that this investigation stimulates further exploration of elements of diversity among fathers, program settings, and context that may serve as modifiers of program outcomes. We also encourage use of a comprehensive family systems framework for addressing and evaluating multiple areas related to family strengthening through fatherhood program services. Fatherhood research and practice are better informed when we recognize the diversity and complexity of fathers' and families' lives and work to meet specific types of fathers' needs. We encourage both process and efficacy evaluations that will help to create more effective and successful program designs in the future and rationale for their continued support.

# Reference List

Anderson, E. A., Kohler, J. K., & Letiecq, B. L. (2005). Predictors of depression among low-income, nonresidential fathers. *Journal of Family Issues,* 26(5), 547–567.

Avellar, S., Covington, R., Moore, Q., Patnaik, A., & Wu, A. (2018). Parents and Children Together: Effects of four responsible fatherhood programs for low-income fathers (OPRE Report No. 2018-50). Washington, D.C.: *Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation Administration for Children and Families*.

Browne, C.H. (2014) The Strengthening Families Approach and Protective Factors Framework: Branching out and reaching deeper. *Washington, D.C.: Center for the Study of Social Policy*. Retrieved from https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Branching-Out-and-Reaching-Deeper.pdf

Center for the Study of Social Policy. (2018). About strengthening families and the protective factors framework. https://www.cssp.org/.

Concha, M., Villar, M. E., Tafur-Salgado, R., Ibanez, S., & Azevedo, L. (2016). Fatherhood education from a cultural perspective: evolving roles and identities after a fatherhood intervention for Latinos in south Florida. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 15(3), 170–179.

Dion, M. R., Zaveri, H., & Holcomb, P. (2015). Responsible fatherhood programs in the parents and children together (pact) evaluation. *Family Court Review*, 53(2), 292–303.

Fagan, J., & Kaufman, R. (2015). Reflections on theory and outcome measures for fatherhood programs. *Families In Society*, 96(2), 133–140.

James Bell Associates (2010). Evaluation Resource Guide for Responsible Fatherhood Programs. U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Retrieved from: https://www.fatherhood.gov/library-resource/evaluation-resource-guide-responsible-fatherhood-programs

Lemke, L. A., Lichtenberg, J. W., & Arachtingi, B. M. (1992). Differences in social support between rural and urban communities. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 348 587). Retrieved from www.ericfacility.net/databases/ERICDigests/ed348587.htm

Mushinski, D., Bernasek, A., & Weiler, S. (2015). Job lock in rural versus urban labor markets. *Growth and Change,* 46(2), 253–273.

Osborne, C., Austin, J., Dion, M. R., Dyer, J., Fagan, J., Harris, K. E., Hayes, M., Mellgren, L., Pearson, J., & Scott, M. E. (2014). Framing the future of responsible fatherhood evaluation research for the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network. Retrieved from http://www.frpn.org

Pearson, J. (2018). State approaches to including fathers in programs and policies dealing with children and families. Retrieved from Center for Policy Research http://centerforpolicyresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/FINAL-FRPN_StateApproaches-Brief_052918_R2-2.pdf

Phenice, L. A., Griffore, R. J., Hakoyama, M. and Silvey, L. A. (2009). Ecocultural adaptive research: A synthesis of ecocultural theory, participatory research, and adaptive designs. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal,* 37, 298–309.

Roy, K. M. & Dyson, O. (2010). Making daddies into fathers: Community-based fatherhood programs and the construction of masculinities for low-income African American men. *American Journal of Community Psychology,* 45, 139–154.

Threlfall, J. M., & Kohl, P. L. (2015). Addressing child support in fatherhood programs: Perspectives of fathers and service providers. *Family Relations,* 64, 291–304.