

# Executive Summary: Fatherhood Programs: Factors Associated with Retention, Completion, and Outcomes

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Widespread attrition and fathers' non-completion of fatherhood programming are recognized problems in the field (Holmes, Hawkins, Egginton, Robbins, & Shafer, 2019; Kim & Jang, 2018). Available literature demonstrates that positive outcomes for fathers and children can be attributed to participating in responsible fatherhood programs (Holmes et al., 2019; JustPartners, Inc., 2010). In their fatherhood program evaluation, Kim and Jang (2018) found that high-dosage levels (i.e., eight or more sessions attended out of 10 total) led to improved parenting satisfaction, which, in turn, increased the frequency of father-child activities.

Previous studies of fatherhood programs identified the problem of non-completion, but few examined associated factors and the effect on outcomes across multiple agencies. The purpose of this mixed methods study is to explore factors that are associated with retention, completion, and outcomes across seven Ohio fatherhood agencies. These research questions guided the study:

1. Which participant factors at intake are associated with attendance levels, program completion, and outcomes?
2. To what extent does client engagement vary based on programmatic characteristics? To what extent does client engagement differ between and among programs/agencies?
3. To what extent is program completion associated with specific outcomes including coparenting, parenting self-efficacy, and the child-father relationship?

## Sample Characteristics

A total of 1,454 fathers enrolled in the program; the number of participants varied across the agencies. Of these fathers, 642 (44%) were incarcerated and 810 (56%) were community fathers. The analysis focuses on a sample of low-income, mostly nonresident fathers with lower education levels who reside across many Ohio counties and who participate in fatherhood services.

## Instruments and Methods

The assessment tools included a pre/post survey that included six self-report scales: 1) co-parenting factors (i.e., gatekeeping, alliance, and undermining); 2) economic well-being and stability domain; 3) the quality and closeness of their child-father

relationship; 4) their recent personal challenges including employment, finances, co-parenting, legal issues, and emotional and behavioral issues; 5) their self-efficacy; 6) father engagement and involvement with the child.

The quantitative and qualitative questions from the exit survey sought fathers' self-perception regarding domains related to relationships with their children, parenting classes or communication, child support, legal issues, employment, and referrals, education, or counseling. The remaining questions examined satisfaction with services and life changes since enrollment. In addition, to explore agency practices one staff member per agency was interviewed.

Of the 1,454 initially enrolled fathers, 790 completed the intake demographic survey and the pre/post surveys. The average number of classes attended for fathers who had completed at least one class was 5.93 for incarcerated fathers and 8.3 for community fathers. The average number of case management sessions for fathers who had completed case management services was 1.73 for incarcerated fathers and 5.76 for community fathers.

The heart of the quantitative analysis revolves around scales and subscales constructed from items in the pre/post surveys to address the research questions. Analyses were done using repeated measures ANOVAs. Qualitative data were analyzed using two questions from the exit survey and from interviews done with one staff member per agency.

## Results and Discussion

Only about half of all the enrolled fathers completed the programming, which fits with the literature. Both qualitative and quantitative findings showed that the fathers who completed classes and received case management services were very satisfied with their relationships with staff and other fathers, the interventions they received, their overall experiences, and their outcomes. Following completed interventions, fathers wrote about their increased ability to overcome barriers, improve their fathering, find social support, gain job skills, make progress to meet their goals, and other noteworthy gains. Fathers and agency interviewees emphasized the importance of building relationships, showing care and respect, providing social support. Other notable findings include:

- The data indicated no compelling demographic differences between completers and noncompleters and no consistent outcomes associated with completion.
- Client engagement varied by programmatic characteristics and agency, enrollment, and participation across only seven agencies. The agencies' capacity, size, and number of and types of geographic locations differed widely, as did differences in curriculum.
- There are inconclusive findings regarding the extent to which program completion is associated with specific outcomes studied. For Father's Involvement outcomes, some evidence indicated that case management services completion had a positive impact on community fathers' involvement with their children. For the Child-Father Relationship outcomes, completers scored lower than noncompleters. Neither class nor case management services completion was significant for incarcerated fathers' outcomes.

## Implications for Practice and Researchers

Providers should create and maintain an agency culture that emphasizes respect in order to build trust, rapport, and strong relationships between and among fathers and agency staff, and other social supports to improve retention, fathering outcomes, and strong word-of-mouth recruitment.

Future studies ought to examine agencies that are more similar in size, structure, curriculum, and participant demographics and include objective data along with self-reported data. Future studies ought to examine the effect of agency culture on class completion and outcomes. Finally, the effect of programming on incarcerated fathers is another needed area for exploration.

Despite its limitations, this study is another step in identifying strategies that can improve retention of fathers in programs and their attainment of successful outcomes. While our study yielded some helpful findings, it also raised more questions.

