

# WHERE IS THE F IN MCH? FATHER INVOLVEMENT IN AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

**Objectives:** To: 1) review the historical contexts and current profiles of father involvement in African American families; 2) identify barriers to, and supports of, involvement; 3) evaluate the effectiveness of father involvement programs; and 4) recommend directions for future research, programs, and public policies.

**Methods:** Review of observational and interventional studies on father involvement.

**Results:** Several historical developments (slavery, declining employment for Black men and increasing workforce participation for Black women, and welfare policies that favored single mothers) led to father absence from African American families. Today, more than two thirds of Black infants are born to unmarried mothers. Even if unmarried fathers are actively involved initially, their involvement over time declines. We identified multiple barriers to, and supports of, father involvement at multiple levels. These levels include intrapersonal (eg, human capital, attitudes and beliefs about parenting), interpersonal (eg, the father's relationships with the mother and maternal grandmother), neighborhoods and communities (eg, high unemployment and incarceration rates), cultural or societal (eg, popular cultural perceptions of Black fathers as expendable and irresponsible, racial stratification and institutionalized racism), policy (eg, Earned Income Tax Credit, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, child support enforcement), and life-course factors (eg, father involvement by the father's father). We found strong evidence of success for several intervention programs (eg, *Reducing the Risk*, *Teen Outreach Program*, and *Children's Aid Society – Carrera Program*) designed to prevent formation of father-absent families, but less is known about the effectiveness of programs to encourage greater father involvement because of a lack of rigorous research design and evaluation for most programs.

**Conclusion:** A multi-level, life-course approach is needed to strengthen the capacity of African American men to promote greater involvement in pregnancy and parenting as they become fathers. (*Ethn Dis.* 2010;20[Suppl 2]:s2-49–s2-61)

**Key Words:** African American Fathers, Maternal Health, Child Health, Family

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## BACKGROUND

Men are important to maternal and child health (MCH). Much has been written about fathers' influence on child health and development.<sup>1–6</sup> In early childhood, father involvement is associated with better cognitive and socio-emotional development in young children.<sup>2,7,8</sup> During middle childhood, paternal involvement in children's schooling is associated with greater academic achievement and fewer behavioral problems.<sup>2,4</sup> In adolescence, high involvement between fathers and adolescents is associated with better educational, behavioral, and emotional outcomes.<sup>9–13</sup> Conversely, children growing up in father-absent families are at greater risk for various educational or behavioral problems and poorer developmental outcomes, even after

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controlling for parental education, income and other factors.<sup>5</sup> Less is known about the male partner's influence on maternal health. In ethnographic studies, pregnant African American women identified their male partners as a vital source of support or stress.<sup>14,15</sup> A growing body of literature suggests that maternal psychosocial stress is an important risk factor for poor pregnancy outcomes,<sup>16,17</sup> and partner support can modify that risk.<sup>18</sup> One study found partner support to be associated with positive maternal health behaviors during pregnancy, including early prenatal care and decreased smoking and drug use.<sup>19</sup>

In this article, we examine father involvement in pregnancy and parenting among African American men. First, we review the historical contexts and current profiles of father involvement in African American families. Second, we identify barriers to, and supports of, father involvement. Third, we evaluate the impact of programs designed to increase father involvement. Lastly, we make recommendations on the directions for future research, programs and public policies. We contend that a multi-level, life-course approach is needed to strengthen the capacity of African American men for greater involvement in pregnancy and parenting.

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## HISTORICAL CONTEXTS AND CURRENT PROFILES OF BLACK FATHER INVOLVEMENT

Father absence in Black families can be traced to several historical developments. The legacy of slavery played a

major role in the disabling of Black fathers.<sup>20</sup> In W.E.B. DuBois' classic study in 1899, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*,<sup>21</sup> he argued that the instability of Black families resulted from slavery. Slavery created laws and social norms that broke the bonds between fathers and children.<sup>22</sup> Under slavery, Black men were not allowed to fulfill their roles either as providers or protectors of their families.<sup>20</sup> Some scholars argue that the legacy of slavery, and family instability driven by the slavery system, continue to contribute to father absence in the African American families.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Andrew Hacker's book entitled *Two Nations: Black, White, Separate, Hostile, Unusual*, states the reluctance of White Americans to extend "full nationality to the descendants of African slaves."<sup>24</sup> He argues that race remains the critical factor causing tension and disparities separating African American and Whites. Any discussion of social mobility among African American men is incomplete if it ignores the implications of the huge social chasm that still separates African Americans and Whites a century and a quarter after the abolition of slavery.<sup>24</sup> The vestiges of slavery still imposed on African American men have created a caste-like status that isolates and carves for them a specialized and inferior niche within the social stratification system.<sup>25</sup>

Of late, historians have reexamined the complexity and importance of slave kin ties and emphasized the resiliency of the Black slave family.<sup>26</sup> Historians noted that marriages were remarkably stable and most slave women had their children by the same father. These family relationships, as Robert Griswald observed in *Fatherhood in America*, provided a crucial resource that helped Blacks endure the oppression of slavery. For their part, slave fathers played a vital role in Black family life even though their power was tightly circumscribed by their White masters.<sup>26</sup>

Another important historical development was the decline of economic

opportunities for African American men beginning in the 1970s. Several trends contributed to the loss of jobs and wages, including deindustrialization, deunionization, suburbanization and globalization of jobs, White and Black flight from the inner cities, which led to a lower tax base, decrease in public services, increase in crime and violence, and social and physical deterioration of inner-city communities.<sup>27</sup> The lack of employment opportunities in the inner cities where most Black men reside made them less marriageable and less able to provide for their families. The rise in incarceration of young Black men beginning in the 1980s, driven largely by the "war on crimes" and "war on drugs," further depleted the marriage market and deterred family formation in many urban African American communities.<sup>28</sup>

Women's growing participation in the workforce over the past few decades has also changed the American family. The growth of women's financial power and independence, along with the stagnation of men's wages, led to the decline of the relative importance of a father's financial support for their children and families.<sup>1</sup> For poor families, welfare policies such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) that favored single-parent families made paternal involvement even less necessary. In some cases, such policies drove fathers underground lest their presence disqualified the mothers from receiving welfare.<sup>29</sup>

These historical trends have led to increased single parenthood among African American families. In 2002, two out of three (68.4%) African American infants were born to unmarried mothers.<sup>30</sup> The proportion of Black infants born to unmarried mothers has tripled in the last 40 years, up from 22% in 1960. Today approximately one third (36%) of African American children under age 18 live in households with two married parents, a rate less than half that among non-Hispanic White children (77%).<sup>31</sup> More than

half (51%) live with mothers only, and 5% lived with fathers only.<sup>31</sup>

This, however, does not mean that unmarried Black fathers are uninvolved and detached from their responsibilities as fathers. As African American familial obligations have been molded by a different set of historical and cultural factors (mostly notable, the legacy of slavery, peonage, and migration that has forced Black families to expand their obligations among networks of "kin and friend"), the Black male has still been resilient in the face of adversity and managed to have positive and nurturing interaction with their children. To support this hypothesis, McAdoo assessed the experiences and child-relations of middle-income Black fathers and identified the interaction as "warm and loving, supportive, and meeting implicit and explicit needs of the children."<sup>32</sup> Data from the 1999 National Survey of America's Families suggest that while poor non-Black infants primarily experience father involvement through marriage, poor Black infants primarily do so through visiting arrangements outside of marriage. Nearly half (45%) of poor Black infants lived in households where the parents were never married but the father visited at least once per week, and another 5% lived where the parents were divorced but the father visited at least once per week.<sup>33</sup> In the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, four out of five unmarried Black couples were romantically involved at the time their children were born.<sup>34</sup> Eighty-one percent of the Black mothers in the study indicated that the father provided financial help during the pregnancy, and three fourths reported that the father visited her and the infant in the hospital. Nearly all fathers interviewed reported that they wanted to be involved in raising their children in the coming years.<sup>34</sup> However, as this study recognizes, these unmarried families are "fragile" because of the multiple risk factors associated with non-marital childbearing and are at risk for father disengagement. At one year

after a non-marital birth, only a small proportion (6%) of these relationships resulted in marriage, and one third of the couples had separated.<sup>35</sup> Today nearly half (49%) of all poor Black children under age 18 live in households headed by single mothers with little or no father involvement.<sup>33</sup>

In sum, father absence in the African American families can be traced to the legacy of slavery, declining employment and real wages for Black men concomitant to increasing workforce participation for Black women, and welfare policies that favored single mothers. These historical developments have led to increased single parenthood among African American families; today more than two thirds of Black infants are born to unmarried mothers. In effect, marriage and childbearing have become uncoupled. While initially many unmarried Black men may be actively involved in pregnancy and parenting, over time their involvement declines.

## BARRIERS TO, AND SUPPORTS OF, BLACK FATHER INVOLVEMENT

We will take an ecological<sup>36</sup> and life-course perspective<sup>37</sup> to examine barriers to, and supports of, Black father involvement. The ecological perspective, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's model,<sup>36</sup> conceptualizes influences on father involvement at multiple levels. The life-course perspective recognizes that, like mothers, fathers have a life history of their own. Their involvement in their children's lives is determined in part by their own life experiences, including their father's involvement in their lives growing up. Their capacity to support and nurture needs to be cultivated not only after they become fathers, but over their entire life course.

### Intrapersonal factors

Research on barriers to and supports of father involvement among low-in-

come, minority, and unmarried fathers has focused mostly on paternal characteristics such as human capital and paternal attitudes and beliefs.<sup>1</sup> A father's human capital refers to his knowledge, skills, and behaviors about parenting. In a study of adolescent fathers living in a predominantly African American urban community, disinterest in child rearing most consistently predicted un-involvement.<sup>38</sup> Of those fathers who cited disinterest, there was an association with lack of money and lack of knowledge of child care. The two most important characteristics of human capital that predict father involvement appear to be the father's educational and employment status. Numerous studies have found that low-income, non-residential, and minority fathers with jobs and education are likely to be more involved with their children.<sup>39-42</sup> Many unemployed fathers' access to their children is barred by the child's mother or other family members because of the man's inability to provide for his child.<sup>1,42-44</sup> These unemployed fathers may also remove themselves from their children because of shame or disrespect.<sup>1,45</sup>

The father's attitudes toward and beliefs about fathering and parenting responsibilities may also play an important role in determining involvement. Fathers with a stronger commitment to parenting and who see their role as a father integral to their self-image are, not surprisingly, more involved fathers, regardless of their marital and residential status.<sup>1,46-49</sup> Fathers with more gender-equitable attitudes also tend to be more active, warm, and involved with their children than do those with less gender-equitable values.<sup>50</sup> Some qualitative studies have also related the father's self-concept and self-esteem to father involvement.<sup>51</sup> A father's attitudes toward parenting are also shaped by his own personal life experiences. For example, one study on incarcerated fathers, found that the majority grew up without their fathers, witnessed parental substance abuse and

experienced the incarceration of an immediate family member; and suggested that these life experiences were a catalyst to the lack of involvement in their children's lives.<sup>52</sup>

### Interpersonal Factors

The father's relationship with the child's mother and maternal grandmother are two of the most important interpersonal factors influencing father involvement, particularly for low-income, unmarried Black fathers. Several studies have demonstrated the central role that romantic relationships between fathers and mothers play in paternal involvement.<sup>7,53-58</sup> One study of low-income African American adolescent mothers found that paternal involvement was predicted most strongly by the quality of the parents' romantic relationship.<sup>53</sup> Another study found that mothers who reported positive partner relationships also reported high parenting efficacy and satisfaction with father involvement.<sup>57</sup> A breakdown in the romantic relationship between parents, therefore, can pose a barrier to a father's involvement with his child. Such breakdown could occur if the father is unresponsive to the mother's psychological needs,<sup>57</sup> if the mother harbors resentment toward the father for exiting the romantic relationship,<sup>53</sup> or if the mother enters a romantic relationship with a new partner, particularly if the new partner or the mother's family disapproved of her continued relationship with the father.<sup>57</sup>

Research has also shown that maternal grandmothers play an important "gatekeeping" role in father involvement.<sup>53-55,59,60</sup> Fathers are more involved in households in which maternal grandmothers had higher levels of education and reported a positive relationship with the baby's father.<sup>53</sup> Conversely, fathers are less likely to be involved with their children if they had a negative and unsupportive relationship with the maternal grandmother.<sup>53,57</sup> Maternal grandmothers

are an important source of support for the adolescent mother; they helped buffer the negative effects of strain in the adolescents' relationships. However, this can set up an adversarial relationship between the maternal grandmother and father, posing an additional barrier for father involvement.

### Neighborhood and Community Factors

The past few years have witnessed an explosion of interest in neighborhood or area effects on maternal and child health<sup>61,62</sup>; however, little is known about their effects on father involvement. We could find no published studies using ecological, contextual or multi-level analyses relating neighborhood or community contexts to paternal involvement. Qualitative studies, including some ethnographic research, suggest that characteristics of the inner-city communities where a majority of African American men reside may influence involvement.<sup>14,63</sup> Two in particular – high rates of unemployment and incarceration in a community – have been identified as important barriers to father involvement.<sup>63</sup>

The lack of employment opportunities for young Black men in many inner cities, resulting from economic restructuring and continued racial discrimination, makes them less marriageable.<sup>26,63</sup> In some of America's largest cities, more than half of their Black male residents are jobless. The Fragile Families study found, on average, only 46 employed African American males per 100 females across 20 cities, as compared to 80 employed males per 100 females in the Hispanic and White groups.<sup>63</sup> The authors found that an "undersupply" of employed Black men explains most of the racial-ethnic differences in marriage rates following a non-marital birth. Unemployed fathers are also less able to provide for their children or pay child support. Thus, the lack of employment opportunities in an urban neighborhood deters father

involvement by making men less marriageable and less able to provide for their families.

High rates of incarceration among young Black men in many inner-city neighborhoods may also deter father involvement. During the past two decades, there was a sharp rise in the incarceration of largely young, poorly educated, minority males, driven primarily by the "war on crime" (eg, three-strikes laws) and the "war on drugs."<sup>27,64</sup> Estimates indicate that, on an average day in 1996, one in eight (12.1%) poor Black men aged 20 to 35 were behind bars.<sup>28</sup> More young, poorly educated, Black men were behind bars than were in paid employment.<sup>28,64</sup> The lifetime risk that an African man will spend time in prison at some point in his life is 28.5%, compared to 4.4% for a White man.<sup>65</sup> In the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, 28% of fathers reported that they had been incarcerated in the past. This may be an under-reporting, as 56% of mothers in the study reported that their partner had been incarcerated in the past.<sup>66</sup> Incarceration can deter family formation and father involvement. One study found that father's incarceration status has a large negative effect on the likelihood that the parents will be living together one year after the birth of the child.<sup>66</sup> Incarceration reduces the employment prospects and earning potential of ex-inmates, and thereby their marriageability.<sup>66</sup> It also reduces social respectability and signals unreliability for possible marriage partners. Incarceration can also impact father involvement directly by making it more difficult for fathers to live or be involved with their children. Neighborhoods with high incarceration rates will have poor marriage markets and low father involvement.<sup>66</sup>

### Cultural and Societal Factors

One important cultural influence on father involvement is the growing perception that fathers, particularly

Black fathers, are expendable in parenting. When asked whether one parent can bring up a child as well as two parents together, only one third (35%) of Black fathers, but two thirds (64%) of Black mothers, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.<sup>67</sup> This cultural perception has been fueled by declining wages and employment among Black men, welfare policies that favored households headed by single mothers, and the positive portrayal of single motherhood in the media.<sup>20</sup>

Another important cultural influence is the popular portrayal of Black fathers as uncaring and irresponsible. This portrayal, however, is not supported by the few studies that have examined the attitudes and beliefs of Black fathers about fathering. One survey found that 85% of African American fathers agreed or strongly agreed that watching children grow up is life's greatest joy, compared to 77% for non-Hispanic White fathers and 73% for Hispanic fathers.<sup>67</sup> Only 1% of African American fathers agreed or strongly agreed that it is better not to have children because they are such a heavy financial burden, compared to 5% for non-Hispanic White fathers and 17% for Hispanic fathers.<sup>67</sup> Another study of fathers from lower- or middle-class families found that Black fathers are more likely to share housework and child care than White fathers and that, controlling for employment, income, and sex-role attitudes, there is more egalitarianism among Black fathers in sharing household tasks with their spouses.<sup>68</sup> Other studies have also found that unmarried African American fathers are more likely to visit and to participate in child-related decision making and marginally more likely to provide financial support than their European or Hispanic American counterparts.<sup>69,70</sup> Given the prevalence of non-marital childbearing among low-income African Americans, African American men may have developed a more clear shared understanding of the

role of unmarried fathers in their children's lives.<sup>1,9</sup>

While much has been written about personal and cultural barriers, real or stereotyped, relatively little is known about the resiliency factors that support father involvement in the Black community. We believe that an important source of personal and cultural resiliency comes from the broader notion of kinship within the African American community. This kinship extends beyond the biological, nuclear family to encompass close and distant relatives (grandfathers, uncles) and even friends and neighbors who assume the roles and responsibilities of fathering the child in the absence of the biological father. It also blurs the distinction between biological and step-children for the step-father, a distinction that is commonly made much clearer among White families. This kinship also involves cultural institutions including faith-based and civic organizations that actively partake in the children's social development and moral upbringing. Some scholars have argued that this broader notion of kinship is born out of a culture of survival – the need for Black children and communities to survive and thrive in the face of social and economic forces that are driving Black families apart. This notion of kinship is often overlooked by researchers studying father absence in Black America; many Black children growing up in so-called fatherless families nonetheless have some father figures in their lives. The challenge for researchers, program planners and policymakers is to figure out how to better support these fathers (we avoided using the term “social fathers” because the distinction between biological and social fathers is not commonly made in the African American community) in fathering.

Of course, the strength of this “kinship” is not limitless, especially in the setting of societal factors (eg, deindustrialization, deunionization, and deterioration of the inner cities)

that disabled many Black men from providing for their families. Racial stratification is one such factor. Racial stratification is the process of using race as a factor in the allocation of resources and power in a society.<sup>71</sup> The economic disadvantages that African Americans suffer, some scholars argue, are a direct result of racial stratification. The research of Oliver and Shapiro<sup>72</sup> underscores the legacy of economic barriers, such as unfair banking practices, to wealth accumulation for Black men and families. Institutionalized racism has also been well-documented in other domains of life including the workplace, housing, and healthcare.<sup>73</sup> Arguably racial stratification and institutionalized racism may be one of the most important barriers to father involvement in the African American families.

### Policy Factors

Current tax, welfare and child support policies may also deter family formation and father involvement. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a federal tax credit for low-income families that is refundable in cash, carries a substantial marriage penalty.<sup>74</sup> In 2003, the limit on annual earnings to qualify for the EITC was \$33,692 for a single parent with two children, and \$34,692 for a married couple with two children. Unmarried couples who are both working risk losing some or all of their EITC by deciding to get married because their combined income may exceed the limit in which the EITC would be phased out. The loss of income could be substantial, up to 30% of the combined annual income for the couple.<sup>75</sup>

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and other public benefits programs may also favor one-parent families over two-parent families.<sup>76</sup> While many state TANF programs appear to have reduced or eliminated restrictions for two-parent families, others still retain such restrictions.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, many states and localities give preference to one-parent

families in allocating scarce child care and housing subsidies. As a result, low-income single parents are more likely to receive public assistance than married couples; in 1997, 40% of poor children living with a single parent receive TANF, compared to 10% for poor children living with both parents.<sup>74</sup> Since TANF serves as a point of entry into other public assistance programs like Women, Infants and Children (WIC), Medicaid, food stamps and school lunch programs for many low-income families, two-parent families often have less access to these services than single-parent families.<sup>75</sup>

Child support can also deter father involvement.<sup>76,77</sup> Low-income non-custodial fathers are routinely required to pay much higher proportions of their income than middle- and upper-income fathers, and many are required to pay unreasonable amounts of arrearages.<sup>76</sup> These arrearages are often assessed based on the father's imputed income rather than actual earnings; fathers who become unemployed or incarcerated build up huge arrearages during these periods of unemployment. In most states, fathers are required to pay back what the mother has received in welfare. The state typically takes all but a minimal \$50 “pass-through” so most of the child support payment does not directly benefit the child or the mother. Additionally, most states now reduce TANF benefits by one dollar for each dollar of child support payment received by the mother. These rules discourage mothers from cooperating with the child support program and fathers from paying child support. In the past, many poor families have opted to bypass the formal system in favor of informal arrangement for financial or in-kind support. In recent years, stricter enforcement of child policy rules may deter unmarried fathers from legitimate work where their wages are easily intercepted, or drive them “underground” where it becomes more difficult for them to stay involved in their children's lives.<sup>76,77</sup>

Recently, there has been increasing legislative activities in the United States Congress. An example is US Senate Bill 2830, "The Healthy Marriages and Responsible Fatherhood Act of 2004." This bill would have temporarily extended TANF for six months and authorized funding for marriage promotion and fatherhood programs for two years. This bill could strengthen father involvement because it authorizes money for father involvement programs. However, it would have also diverted TANF funding that could be used for cash assistance, child care, and other programs benefiting poor families, and put it toward marriage promotion activities.

### Life Course Factors

Studies have shown that fathers' involvement in their children's lives is much influenced by their own fathers' involvement in their lives growing up. Men whose fathers were involved in raising them have been found to be more involved with their own children, to take more responsibility for them, to show more warmth, and to more closely monitor their behaviors and activities.<sup>50,78</sup> Conversely, men who did not have a positive fathering model are less involved with their children. One study found that fathers who had experienced a stressful rearing environment spent less time living with their first-born child.<sup>79</sup> In a qualitative study, young Black fathers cited problems with their self-concept and self-esteem as a barrier to adequate father involvement, generally stemming from their own experiences of abusive and neglectful parenting, and the reinforcement of the notion that they were "no good."<sup>51</sup>

Little is currently known about other life course influences on father involvement. No researcher has yet put together the developmental trajectory that move boys to fatherhood, or described the multiple influences across the life course that give meaning to and shape the practice of fatherhood.<sup>78</sup> Men who had caretaking experience and

more non-gender, stereotyped task assignments during childhood were more likely to be involved with their children.<sup>80,81</sup> The timing of fatherhood also appears to be an important factor; when adolescents become fathers, it is often unintended. A growing body of evidence suggests that a father's positive parenting may be strongly associated with whether the pregnancy was intended.<sup>82</sup> A critical period in the father's development may be right before or at the time of the child's birth. In the Fragile Families study, nearly all young, unmarried fathers, at the time of the child's birth, indicated that they want to be involved in raising their children in the coming years.

In sum, we identified multiple factors at multiple levels that could influence Black father involvement. Among the most important are the father's own human capital (eg, education and employment) and his attitudes and beliefs about parenting, his relationships with the mother and maternal grandmother, high unemployment and incarceration rates in many inner-city neighborhoods and communities, popular cultural perceptions of Black fathers as expendable and irresponsible, racial stratification and institutionalized racism, and tax (eg, EITC), welfare (eg, TANF) and child support policies that discourage family formation and father involvement. The father's involvement may be influenced by his own father's involvement in his life growing up. For young, unmarried fathers, the time right before the child's birth may be a critical period in their development into fatherhood, and may present a small window of opportunity for interventions to increase father involvement.

### INTERVENTIONS TO INCREASE FATHER INVOLVEMENT

A growing number of father involvement programs have been developed

in recent years. In general, these intervention programs can be divided into two categories: 1) programs to discourage the formation of father-absent families, and 2) programs to encourage greater father involvement.<sup>83</sup>

### Interventions to Discourage the Formation of Father-absent Families

These programs prevent men from having children before they are ready for the financial and emotional responsibilities of fatherhood. Most of these programs target adolescents. In the most comprehensive review of evaluation research on programs to prevent teen pregnancy to date, Kirby identified several programs with strong evidence of success.<sup>84</sup>

#### *Sex and HIV Education Programs*

Three HIV education programs<sup>85,86</sup> and two sex education programs<sup>87,88</sup> covering both pregnancy and STDs/HIV were identified as having strong evidence of success.<sup>84</sup> All five programs have been shown to delay the onset of sexual intercourse or increase contraceptive use. These programs shared a number of characteristics in common, most importantly, they are: theory-based; focus on reducing one or more sexual behaviors; deliver and reinforce a clear message about abstinence and/or contraceptive use; provide basic, accurate information about the risks of teen sexual activity; include activities that address social pressures; provide training with communication, negotiation and refusal skills; and employ teaching methods that personalize the information. Research indicates that these types of curricula need to be administered for a sufficient length of time; short-term curricula were not found to have measurable impact on teen sexual behaviors.<sup>84</sup>

#### *Youth Development Programs*

Among youth development programs, two service learning pro-

grams<sup>89-91</sup> also demonstrated strong evidence of success.<sup>84</sup> These programs included two components: 1) voluntary service by teens in the community; and 2) structured time for preparation and reflection before, during, and after service. Both programs were shown to reduce the teen pregnancy rate while the youth were participating in the program. Unfortunately the studies did not include process measures, and so it remains unclear why service learning was so successful.

### *Multi-component Programs*

One program with both sexuality and youth development components also showed strong evidence of success.<sup>84</sup> The Children's Aid Society - Carrera Program<sup>92</sup> is a long-term, intensive intervention program with multiple components including: 1) family life and sex education; 2) individual academic assistance; 3) work-related activities; 4) self-expression through the arts; 5) sports activities; and 6) comprehensive health care. To our knowledge, this is the first and only study to date that includes random assignment, multiple sites, and a large sample size while making an impact on sexual and contraceptive behavior, pregnancy, and births among girls for as long as three years. Unfortunately, the program did not reduce sexual risk-taking among boys.

Notably, Kirby also reviewed other types of intervention programs to prevent teen pregnancy and found mixed results.<sup>84</sup> He found no support for abstinence-only programs. He also found encouraging results from the only intervention study that began in early childhood. In the Abecedarian Project,<sup>93</sup> infants in low-income families were randomly assigned to a full-time, year-round day care program focused on improving cognitive development or to regular infant day care. In elementary school, they were again assigned to a three-year parent involvement program or to a normal school environment. The

children were followed for 21 years. Children in the enhanced day-care program delayed childbearing by more than a year in comparison with the control group. More studies that take this life-course approach are needed.

### **Interventions to Encourage Greater Father Involvement**

Compared to teen pregnancy prevention programs, fewer father involvement programs have been rigorously designed or evaluated. An extensive review of 300 community-based fatherhood programs by Levine and Pitt<sup>94</sup> revealed a paucity of evaluation information on the effectiveness of these programs. Our literature search found only a few local, community-based fatherhood programs with an experimental or pseudo-experimental design. One expectant father's educational program in Illinois found that while fathers enjoyed the program and there was a measurable immediate post-workshop increase in comfort level with newborn care, the long-term effect was not significant.<sup>95</sup> One promising program is the Father/Male Involvement Preschool Teacher Education Program.<sup>96</sup> The goal of the program was to help teachers increase father/male involvement in state-funded preschool programs for at-risk students. Teachers were given training on topics such as: staff development; planning and implementing events such as father/child picnics, gym nights, and classroom nights; and developing other outreach initiatives to encourage father/male involvement. The study found fathers at the preschool with the training program participated in parent involvement activities at a significantly higher rate than those at the comparison school. These findings, however, were limited by small sample size, the post-test-only design, and lack of a long-term follow-up.

### *Child Access Demonstration Projects*

Some of the first state experiments on father involvement were the Child

Access Demonstration Projects. Implemented in seven states, the projects involved the use of mediation, counseling, education, and visitation monitoring programs designed to facilitate noncustodial fathers' access to their children following divorce and separation. The evaluation study found high incidence of access problems for non-custodial fathers in 4% to 31% of cases.<sup>97</sup> Making both parents attend mediation sessions was found to be critical and difficult. When both parties attended, mediation visitation increased, relitigation was low, and there was increased child support compliance for the experimental vis-a-vis the control groups. Other interventions (eg, parenting classes, counseling), which were done for severely conflicted parties, were not seen as making an additional impact in these areas.

### *Parents' Fair Share Demonstration Projects*

The first large-scale project designed to increase low-income noncustodial fathers' employment, earnings, and ability to pay child support was the Parents' Fair Share Demonstration (PFS).<sup>98</sup> The PFS involved the random assignment of 5,600 noncustodial parents (most fathers who had been divorced and were disconnected from their children) to treatment and non-treatment groups. Fathers assigned to the treatment group received employment assistance, peer support, case management, and temporary reduction in child support order. The results were largely discouraging. Overall there was no increase in the amount of contact that fathers had with their children.<sup>99</sup> Regular contact did increase for fathers with the lowest rates of pre-program contact and with no high-school credential. Similarly, the PFS was found to have no effect on the frequency of father-mother interactions; a slight increase in parental conflict was noted. The PFS did increase employment and earnings for the least-employable men

but not for those who were more able to find work on their own.<sup>100</sup> While parents in the PFS group increased their formal payment of child support, custodial parents reported some decline in informal support resulting in no changes in the total level of support available to custodial parents when both informal and formal support were taken into account.<sup>101</sup> The PFS highlighted the multiple challenges of supporting low-income fathers and families, and the need to develop new program models.<sup>83</sup>

### *United States Department of Health and Human Services Fatherhood Initiative*

In 1995, President Clinton challenged all federal agencies to reach out to fathers to support their positive involvement in the lives of their children. The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) started a variety of programs to increase father involvement through its fatherhood initiative.<sup>101</sup> These include:

- Responsible Fatherhood programs. Projects in eight states are testing comprehensive approaches to encourage father involvement by providing a range of needed services related to job search and training, access and visitation, social services or referral, case management and child support.
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) fatherhood programs. Funds from TANF are being used in nearly half of all states to develop responsible fatherhood programs.
- Abstinence Education. In 2004, nearly \$75 million in federal grants were made to support community and state programs that educate adolescents and parents about the risks associated with early sexual activity and provide the tools needed to help teens make responsible choices.
- Early Head Start. In 2001, 21 Early Head Start fatherhood demonstra-

tion projects were funded for three years to develop and implement innovative practices to increase the involvement of fathers in Early Head Start and in the lives of their children.

- Fathers in the Criminal Justice System. Several state and local projects have been funded to provide services to non-custodial parents who are incarcerated, unemployed or underemployed to increase employment and reintegrate them into their communities.

One of the most innovative programs in the HHS Fatherhood Initiative is the Partners for Fragile Families (PFF). Previous programs have generally enrolled fathers referred by the courts, who typically have substantial arrearages and have been disconnected from their children for a number of years. Targeting programs to serve unmarried fathers at the birth of their children, when they are still attached to the mothers and have high hopes for raising their children, may prove more effective. The PFF is an ongoing demonstration project that employs this early intervention approach by serving young, never-married noncustodial fathers who do not have a child support order in place and may face obstacles to employment. The PFF is testing new ways to help young fathers obtain employment, make child support payments, learn parenting skills, build stronger partnerships with the mothers, and share the legal, financial, and emotional responsibilities of parenthood. Demonstration projects are ongoing in nine states. Many of these Fatherhood Initiative projects have a strong evaluation plan.<sup>102-104</sup>

### *Welfare-to-Work Fatherhood Programs*

Another group of responsible fatherhood programs were implemented in connection with the federal Welfare to Work program. These programs aim to assist hard-to-employ noncustodial fathers find jobs and achieve economic

self-sufficiency. Interim reports<sup>104</sup> found these grants to have encouraged a more serious focus on fathers, and that the keys to increasing job retention and child support among non-custodial fathers might be in the provision of ongoing case management and other support services.

### *Other Programs*

Many other programs on father involvement, including faith-based and community-based programs, attempt to present strong role models for males. Most of these programs have not been critically evaluated.

In sum, several intervention programs designed to prevent teen pregnancy and discourage the formation of father-absent families have been found to demonstrate evidence of success. These include several sex and HIV education programs (eg, *Reducing the Risk*), youth development programs (eg, *Teen Outreach Program*), and a multi-component program (*Children's Aid Society - Carrera Program*), which provided comprehensive services related to family life and sex education, individual academic assistance, work-related activities, self-expression through the arts, sports activities, and comprehensive health care. Less is known about the effectiveness of intervention programs to encourage greater father involvement because of a lack of rigorous research design and evaluation information for most programs. Two large-scale projects, the Child Access Project and the Parents' Fair Share Project, showed generally discouraging results for improving father-mother interactions and father-child contact. Evaluation of other ongoing programs, including the HHS Fatherhood Initiative projects, is underway.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We conclude by recommending directions for future research, interven-



tion programs, and policy reforms to increase father involvement.

## Research

Current research on father involvement can be strengthened in several ways. First, the definitions of “involvement” need to be expanded.<sup>78</sup> Most survey studies have focused on very basic constructs like residence, visitation, and financial support; these constructs do not tap into the fathers’ involvement with their children, the level of responsibility they take,<sup>105–107</sup> the types of activities they do with their children,<sup>94</sup> the quality of involvement<sup>107,108</sup> or their conceptualizations of fatherhood or paternal commitment.<sup>1</sup> Some investigators have proposed better measures of father involvement,<sup>104</sup> such as engagement, availability and responsibility,<sup>105,106</sup> paternal support,<sup>109</sup> interaction and accessibility,<sup>110</sup> paternal index of child care involvement,<sup>111</sup> observed index of father-infant interaction,<sup>112</sup> or activities such as outings away from home, play at home, and reading.<sup>113</sup> Similarly, the definitions of “fathers” need to be broadened. More studies are needed on middle- and higher-income Black fathers as well as poor fathers, married as well as unmarried, non-residential fathers, biological as well as social fathers.<sup>114,115</sup> The outcomes of father involvement also need to be expanded to include not only child development, but also maternal and family health.

Second, the methods by which data on father involvement are collected need to be improved. Much of the information available on father involvement comes by the way of maternal reports; studies have documented significant discrepancies between maternal and paternal reports of father involvement.<sup>70</sup> More research needs to be done from the father’s perspective, even though this may pose the added challenge and financial burden of tracking unmarried, non-residential fathers. Most studies also use convenience samples, raising

concerns about their validity and generalizability.<sup>1</sup> Increasing use of representative and random sampling in study designs will help reduce selection bias and improve generalizability.

Third, future research on father involvement needs to move toward an ecological, multi-level approach. Much of current research on the determinants of father involvement has focused on intrapersonal and interpersonal factors; this body of research has guided the design of intervention programs that emphasize primarily individual responsibilities and interpersonal relationships. More studies are needed to elucidate the influences of contextual (neighborhood, community, cultural and societal) factors using multi-level analyses, as well as on racial stratification and how the lack of resources among African American families has affected family relationships across income spectrum. Future research also needs to move toward a multi-disciplinary approach, integrating methods and perspectives from clinical, social and behavioral sciences.<sup>116</sup>

Lastly, future research needs to take a life-course perspective. Presently little is known about how boys become fathers.<sup>78</sup> Using a life-course approach to help identify critical influences and sensitive periods in the developmental trajectories from boyhood to fatherhood can aid in the development of interventions at various stages across the life course. This calls for more longitudinal studies that will begin to map out these developmental trajectories to fatherhood.

## Programs

First and foremost, quality program evaluation is necessary. Presently there is a paucity of evaluation information on the effectiveness of father involvement programs. While there are many local, community-based fatherhood programs, few have been critically evaluated. Many such programs lack a conceptual framework or theoretical basis for their interventions. Most programs lack pro-

cess measures so even if they had worked, we would not know what worked. Conversely, if the programs had failed, we would not know why they failed. Their reported outcomes are often limited by potential selection biases and the lack of generalizability. Experimental design with random and representative sampling will increase the validity and generalizability of future intervention studies. Long-term follow-up is needed to see whether program impact will last.

Second, contextual factors such as neighborhood, community, cultural, or societal issues including institutionalized racism must be considered. Most intervention programs have focused on intrapersonal (eg, Parents’ Fair Share projects) factors. Those that targeted interpersonal factors (eg, Child Access projects) have rarely addressed relationships other than that between the mother and the father (eg., the father’s relationship with maternal grandmother or the mother’s new partner). Future intervention programs designed to improve father involvement should take a multi-level, multi-discipline approach and be guided by community-based participatory research which will insure inclusion of key contextual factors.

Future intervention programs also need to take a life-course approach. Men’s capacity to support and nurture needs to be cultivated not only after they become fathers, but over their entire life course. Interventions need to target critical periods (eg, at the time of the child’s birth, as in the Partners for Fragile Families). Program dividends may not pay off for a long time (eg, delayed adolescent childbearing from enhanced day-care program, as shown in the Abecedarian Project) and may accumulate across generations. This would require funders, rather than expecting quick returns, to be prepared to make long-term, life-course and perhaps intergenerational investments.

Lastly, men need to be involved in promoting not only maternal and child

health, but also their own health. Presently few father involvement programs, particularly those targeting low-income men of color, address men's health other than as it relates to sexually-transmitted infections or teen pregnancy. Black men's health needs to be valued in and of itself, and more programs are needed to address Black men's health issues.

### Policy

Reforms in current tax, welfare, and child support policies are needed to encourage family formation and father involvement.<sup>75,76</sup> First, the "marriage penalty" in the EITC can be reduced by allowing deductions on the second earner's income. Second, in determining TANF eligibility the distinction made between single-parent and two-parent families should be eliminated. TANF programs need to become more "father friendly," and more unspent TANF funds should go to support fatherhood initiatives. Third, non-custodial fathers who pay child support should be eligible for the EITC and TANF. Fourth, child support payment should be calculated as a percentage of the father's actual earnings; the percentage should not be set so high that it poses an onerous financial burden or a disincentive to legitimate work for the father. This approach could redress the inequities in the current system whereby low-income fathers pay a higher proportion of their incomes than middle- or higher-income fathers, and reduce the arrearages that can pile up during periods of unemployment or incarceration. Fifth, states should be encouraged to experiment with amnesty programs; as a condition for adjusting or forgiving the arrearages fathers can be required to participate in fatherhood programs. Sixth, if a goal of child support is to reconnect fathers to their children, more of the child support payment should be "passed through" to their children, and lesser amount deducted from TANF payment to the mother.

Lastly, strengthening the capacity of Black men to provide for their families will go a long way toward restoring Black fathers to Black families. Raising the minimum wage, expanding the EITC, strengthening collective bargaining, ensuring fair trade, providing job training and retraining, and revitalizing the inner cities are some of the ways to increase employment and reduce poverty among African American men. From a life-course perspective, expanding educational opportunities not only from Kindergarten through Grade 12, but having educational opportunities from early childhood and pre-kindergarten through college and post-graduate studies and including summer and after-school enrichment programs is the most promising long-term strategy for improving the prospects for employment and marriage (and consequently father involvement) for Black men.<sup>117</sup> Most importantly, any fatherhood initiative, if it is going to have any success in putting the "F" (fathers) back in maternal, child health, must have a core objective that addresses racial discrimination in the workplace and institutionalized racism in the schools, housing, healthcare, criminal justice and other systems that keep many Black men from living out their true potentials in our society.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Support for this work was provided in part by the National Institute of Health Women's Reproductive Health Career Development Fellowship #HD01281-03, the Maternal and Child Health Bureau Maternal and Child Health Interdisciplinary Training Program in Schools of Public Health, Centers for Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Division of Reproductive Health, the National Institute of Nursing Research # U01NR008, and the Los Angeles Best Babies Collaborative, a program of First 5 LA.

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