

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

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Currently, hundreds of fatherhood programs are active across the nation and evaluations of these have increased in number. Few studies, however, have considered diversity of experiences and explored factors that may influence change among participants and their families. The purpose of our study of a large group of fathers participating in fatherhood programs was to assess the average change trajectory in multiple target outcomes over a one-year period and to explore variations in retention and in outcomes within the group, based on geographic setting of the programs (rural or urban), sequencing of services (case management and classes), and race of the father.

In partnership with the Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention

(ADCANP) and the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR), we recruited 630 nonincarcerated and noncustodial fathers in fatherhood programs across 20 sites to participate in the study. Our sample included a majority of Black fathers (60%), with an average age of 36.5 years. The majority of the fathers were not currently married (72%) and were unemployed at program start.

Our assessment of fatherhood program participants' improvements yielded encouraging findings that suggest the longer-term influence of program participation on multiple, key indicators of individual and family well-being. Fathers reported significant growth over one-year in 14 distinct measures in the areas of (1) relationship skills and functioning (couple and coparenting);

(2) hope for ensuring a positive future; (3) father involvement, positive parenting practices, and parent-child relationship quality; (4) child academic adjustment; and (5) monthly income, job status, and commitments to cooperate with child support staff and meet financial obligations. Because of our partnership with the ADCANP and DHR, we frame the enhancements as protective factors for children using the 5-Factor Strengthening Families Protective Factor Framework (Browne, 2014).

While the positive and sustained benefits experienced by the average participant over time in multiple areas related to individual and family strength remains the key takeaway, some information is provided on greater vulnerability and benefit, depending on demographics. Specifically, we find more economic vulnerability of urban fathers at program start and for Black and minority fathers at program start and across time. White fathers report more individual (e.g., drug issues) and work-related challenges at program start. We also find evidence of greater benefit in several areas over time for urban and White participants,

particularly in economic stability improvements, compared to rural and Black fathers. Rural fathers demonstrated greater improvement in coparenting relationships compared to urban fathers, who report higher interpersonal competence at the start. It also appears that receiving case management first enhanced fathers' attendance and completion rates in parenting/coparenting classes, as well as their initial improvements in parent-child relationship quality, financial responsibility, and hope for the future, while receiving case management after classes was associated with greater long-term growth in financial responsibility.

The current study supports previous findings that fatherhood programs positively influence fathers' individual and relational skills and knowledge and their economic stability. This study also advances the literature by attending to and discovering some variations at program start and in fatherhood program outcomes based on several key contextual factors. This serves to alert practitioners to attend to characteristics that may enhance or impede program effectiveness.

