

# Nurturing Families Network Father Involvement Study

## Final Report



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	i
<b>SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES</b>	4
<b>RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN</b>	9
Hopes, Dreams and Fears	10
Role of Father in his Child's Success	16
Parenting Strategies	20
Finding Purpose and Direction	23
<b>RELATIONSHIPS WITH MOTHERS</b>	25
Staying Together	28
Breakups	31
The Aftermath	38
Violence and Control in Relationships	44
<b>JOBS AND FAMILY ECONOMIC STABILITY</b>	51
Family Providers: On Top But Still Struggling	54
Underemployment: Navigation Wizardry in Rocky Terrain	61
The Edges of Unemployment:	
Treading Water in the Pool of Reserve Labor	67
<b>VIOLENCE</b>	77
<b>INTEGRATING NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS     OF FATHERING WITH VIOLENT SOCIAL WORLDS</b>	89
<b>VIEWS ON HOME VISITING AND FATHER SUPPORT GROUPS</b>	94
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	101
<b>PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	103

## FIGURES AND TABLES

	<u>Page</u>
<b>SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES</b>	
Figure 1: Where Fathers Reside in Connecticut	4
Figure 2: Ethno-racial Characteristics of Fathers	5
Table 1: Father's Median Age	5
Figure 3: Fathers with Previous Children	6
Figure 4: Fathers Living with NFN Target Child	6
Figure 5: Fathers Living with Previous Children	7

Figure 6: Percent with Biological Parents Always Present While Growing Up	7
Figure 7: Type of Household Father was Primary Raised In	8
Figure 8: Percent with Close Relationships with Biological Parents	9

# **Nurturing Families Network Father Involvement Study: Final Report**

## ***Executive Summary***

This is the third and final report on the Nurturing Families Network (NFN) father involvement study. We began recruiting and interviewing fathers in the winter of 2008. Working directly with selected NFN program sites, we received contact information for 87 fathers and secured agreements with 35 fathers to participate in the study. Due to budget constraints, we discontinued our efforts to reach more fathers during the summer of 2009.

Our sample represented a diverse group of men who had children participating in the NFN home visiting program. Our respondents were from 13 program sites throughout the state and lived in 16 different cities and towns in Connecticut. Similarly, their ages ranged from 18 to 49 years, with a median age of 25 years. The population was racially and ethnically diverse, with 40% Latino, 26% white, 17% black, 14% bi- or multi-racial, and one Asian Indian father. Experiences also varied considerably in terms of their family backgrounds (especially whether their biological fathers had been present) as did their educational achievements, arrest and incarceration histories, employment histories, and prior experiences as fathers.

At the end of our journey, we had completed second interviews with 21 fathers (60%); third interviews with 17 fathers (49%), and fourth interviews with 11 fathers (31%).

In this report, we begin with a short summary of the fathers' social and demographic characteristics, before turning to six thematic areas. First, we report on the men's expectations and concerns about fatherhood, especially their hopes and dreams for their children, their fears, as well as their parenting strategies. Next, we examine issues concerning their relationships with the mothers of their children, identifying tensions and stresses in their relationships and

how these were being addressed. Third, we provide a detailed discussion of family economic issues, ranging from fathers who were employed in full-time jobs to those who were unemployed. Next, we examine the fathers' experiences with institutional and interpersonal violence and follow this with a section on the difficulties that many of the fathers were having in integrating more normative (or mainstream) expectations of fathering with preparing their children for violent social worlds. Finally we conclude the report with a discussion of fathers' views and attitudes about fathering programs.

### **RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN**

Relationships with children have been an on-going theme throughout the course of our interviews. In our last report we documented the importance our fathers placed on being a financial provider and cultivating a safe home environment where their children could grow and be "successful." However, fathers also expressed trepidations about their lack of parental experience and, in many cases, about the lack of father role models in their lives. In this report, some of the same themes emerge, although extended conversations revealed even deeper concerns about their children's prospects for the future.

#### **Hopes, Dreams, and Fears**

Many of our respondents expressed a version of the American Dream that children should achieve a higher social status than their parents. For most fathers, their hopes that their children would do better than they had done was expressed in specific terms. For those who had been incarcerated, they hoped their children would avoid prison; for fathers who had struggled with drug addictions, they wished their children would stay away from drugs; for fathers who did not graduate high school, they wanted their children to graduate; and for fathers who did not attend college, they wanted their kids to pursue college.

Most fathers saw education as the key to their children's futures. They emphasized the importance of education and wished that their children would reach adulthood with the ability to attain gainful employment that would free them from dead end jobs.

Several fathers, however, saw the harsh realities of their own lives as real threats to their children's futures. While discussing their hopes and dreams for their children, their fears often surfaced. More than 80% in the second and third interviews had observed violence or crime in the neighborhoods where they currently lived. They expressed two related concerns for raising their children. The first was the fear that their children would, for any number of reasons, succumb to illegal activities in the neighborhood. The second invoked the all-too-familiar horror story of becoming an innocent victim of street violence.

Fathers often expressed different fears for their daughters. For sons, they feared gangs and drugs; for daughters, they were concerned about early sexual activity, predatory men, and the stigma of teen pregnancy.

#### The Role of the Father in his Child's Success

As fathers shared their hopes and dreams for their children, we inquired further into whether they considered children's "success" a marker of good parenting. The question required many fathers to reconcile their own life outcomes with their parents' good intentions and efforts. More specifically, several found it hard to blame their parents for their own street lives that had channeled them into the drug economy, drug abuse or prison. In fact, many of the fathers who were involved in criminal activities were more likely to attribute these influences to their peer groups than to their parents' neglect.

As conversations on the topic continued, many fathers became increasingly aware of the limits of what a parent can do, and many concluded these discussions by invoking some version of the familiar cliché that “you can only do what you can do and hope for the best.” This did not mean, however, that they were giving away their locus of control, only that they were searching for more realistic expectations.

### Parenting Strategies

Many of the fathers in our study expressed an interest in being an engaged father. They were changing diapers, giving baths and seeking a parental role that went beyond the traditional family breadwinner or “provider.” Many wanted to have a strong relationship with their children, one where their children could speak to them about any subject, no matter how personal or difficult to discuss with a parent. In fact, many believed that their street experiences provided them with insights and wisdom about how to navigate the difficult worlds that awaited their children. To avoid prison, the streets, drugs, predatory men, and so on, their children would only need to talk to them about it, because they had been there.

Many fathers wanted to talk about how to be a nurturing, caring and sensitive parent who listened and maintained open communication with their children and, at the same time, a disciplinarian -- what many believed was their primary role in the family. This was sometimes expressed as the difficulty of being a “friend” to their children, while also making sure that their children learned to respect their parents and elders, learned that they were not equals, and learned their place in the family.

Like fathers across all social groups, the fathers in our sample were struggling with questions about how to relate to their children, to



develop open and honest communication with them, while also establishing parental boundaries and a structure for them to develop into healthy adults. What may be different, however, was that for many of the fathers in our study, there was an expressed sense of urgency, if not desperation, in getting it right that stemmed from different sources: in some cases, from their own past mistakes; in other cases, from their efforts to be the father that their fathers were not; and still in other cases, from the fear that there was only a small margin for error when parenting in the neighborhoods and schools where they lived.

#### Finding Purpose and Direction

In conversations about their children, several fathers stated that their children provided them with a sense of purpose and direction in their lives. Many of these fathers had been street involved and readily admitted that their former lifestyles were not conducive to healthy parenting. Several said that having a child gave them a reason to reconsider their life choices and their futures. If for no other reason, these fathers worried that their street lives would lead to incarceration that would pull them away from their children.

#### RELATIONSHIPS WITH MOTHERS

In our second interview, we focused on the fathers' relationships with the mothers. Like any intimate relationship, our respondents described highs and lows, with the lows usually centered on romantic and economic issues. One of the highs, for almost all of the fathers, was when they initially found out about the pregnancy. They expressed great joy, but also felt an urgency to "get their lives together."

Expecting a child reframed the relationship as well, and the feelings of being a father needed to be synchronized with the mother's

feelings about the pregnancy. Shared joy was common, but so were fears and mounting stress.

While the men continued to verbalize the joy of being fathers, they also had to weather the dual storms of income insufficiency and the attenuation of romance in their relationships. Our interviews illustrated how their economic problems contributed considerable stress to their relationships, as the fathers struggled to fulfill the provider role. In addition, romantic feelings sometimes became cloudy and confusing, or totally sour, affecting their relationships with the mothers and, in some instances, their newborns.

#### Break-ups

Not surprisingly, income problems affected moods and arguments between the fathers and the mothers of their children. But fading romance in their relationships and, in some instances, infidelities, also affected relationship stability. In relationships that ended during the course of our study, romantic and interpersonal problems were often given as the reasons, but were difficult to untangle from income problems.

We cannot conclude with any certainty why relationships ended, nor was this ever within the scope of our study. Separations and divorce are complex matters and it is often difficult to discern the causes of disaffection. Moreover, in this study we have only the accounts of the fathers to base our interpretations. Our efforts to make some sense of their relationships, at best, would suggest that income problems, feelings of emasculation, drug abuse, infidelities, and disenchantment with the relationships may have contributed.

#### The Aftermath

When couples with children break-up, they add a high degree of complexity to their lives. For some fathers, informal arrangements

suited the needs for both parents to remain emotionally and financially involved in their children's lives. For others, break-ups resulted in animosity and difficulty negotiating the way forward. These fathers might very well benefit from legal advocacy and support to help resolve their custody and child support issues; however, they may also need more sound public policies.

Child support enforcement efforts over the past 25 years have been successful in increasing collections from fathers who have the means to pay. However, these efforts have also drawn our attention to large numbers of fathers who may not have the means to contribute much, if anything, toward multiple households. Child support policy is beyond the scope of this study. However, the stories told to us by some of the fathers point to the significance of the issue, especially when we consider that current policies and practices may be contributing toward reducing father involvement in their children's lives.

#### Violence and Control In Relationships

Most of the men described their conflicts with the mothers as verbal arguments, although a few acknowledged to us that their fights had escalated to physical violence. "Hitting a woman" was generally seen as unacceptable, or even a sign of weakness, among men in the study. If they were perpetrators of physical violence they were not inclined to share this with us.

Power, domination, control and masculinity were all issues which the men in our study were struggling with, even though their stories varied. While physical violence occurs across all families, irrespective of race and class, the fathers in our study met many of the conditions that increase risk of family violence – negotiation skills were often limited, several felt emasculated in their roles as

providers, and around one-half had witnessed physical abuse in their homes while they were growing up.

By focusing on the stresses, strains and challenges of these relationships, however, we do not mean to diminish the efforts that most of our fathers were making to navigate hard-living working-class lives and to sustain intimacy. Field researchers witnessed a wide range of relationships, some of which seemed happy and yet ended before the final interview, and others that seemed rocky and yet endured. It is certainly beyond the scope of this study to explain why some stayed together and others did not. It was clear to us, however, that while relationship stability involved many facets stretching across family histories, emotional dispositions, and language and negotiation skills, the economic stability of the families was central, and for fathers, finding a decent job was not only significant to their role in the family as a provider, but also central to their identity as a man.

### **JOBS AND FAMILY ECONOMIC STABILITY**

Fathers' economic circumstances varied – some were working full-time jobs, others were working part-time on-the-books or off-the-books jobs, while others were unemployed searching for income opportunities in either the formal or informal economies.

Among the 21 fathers completing two interviews, only eight (38%) were working full-time, on-the-books jobs. A little more than one-half (57%) were working at least 40 hours per week. The median wage for those working on-the-books jobs was \$9.00 an hour, a little higher than the median wage for those working off-the-books jobs at \$8.00 an hour. Four fathers (19%) were unemployed. As this suggests, many of the fathers were working at jobs that fell far short of paying a family, or living, wage and because of the precariousness of these jobs, most did not receive employee benefits.

The larger challenge, here, is to understand and appreciate the daily grind of poverty where everything hangs by only a thread, and where attention to accumulating and exchanging resources exhausts the day, even when there are no major eruptions. Life consists of balancing, juggling, stretching, borrowing, pleading, cussing, praying, running, and hiding in the daily struggle to navigate hard-living working-class lives. And we found that small victories or failures, like maintaining a cell phone, making rent on time, keeping a vehicle on the road, or finding an informal income opportunity could be the difference between getting up the next day prepared for the grind or giving into despondency and its related outcomes.

All fathers in our study considered working to be an integral part of being a responsible father. However, many shared stories about feeling alienated, socially disconnected, and embarrassed that they were unable to pay their bills in a timely fashion. Even the more successful fathers working full time were often living one paycheck away from family disaster, or in some cases one or two paychecks behind their wishes for stability.

#### Family Providers – On Top But Still Struggling

Fathers employed full-time were certainly better off than other fathers in our study, but most remained some distance from the reaches of working-class stability. Most described related stress on their relationships, concerns about housing and neighborhood conditions, and fears about the precariousness of their employment.

#### Underemployment: Navigation Wizardry in Rocky Terrain

Underemployed fathers were involuntarily working part-time jobs, seeking full-time employment. For most of these jobs, there were no prospects for full-time employment, and none of them paid enough to support a family. Incarceration histories and an economic

recession often combined to narrow these fathers' income opportunities. Self-blame and family tensions ensued as they confronted an unforgiving economy; however, they distinguished themselves from the last group of fathers in our study who had even more problems finding and sustaining work.

#### The Edges of Unemployment: Treading Water in the Pool of Reserve Labor

Many in this group adopted different income generating sources at different times during the course of our study and some had been formally employed at various points in time. What was evident in their stories was their deft navigation of limited income and family resources, picking up any type of informal work when available, borrowing money from friends or family when necessary, and moving in with or taking in family members, when needed.

The unemployed fathers in this section join the 170,000 workers in the state who are now formally unemployed. The barriers that these fathers normally face – felony convictions, poor housing conditions, limited formal education, and the lack of transportation, child care, and phone service – were even more restrictive in the current economic environment. The inability of many fathers to attain any semblance of remunerative employment left them jaded, disheartened and reconciled to the reality that they must navigate poverty as best they can. Even though about one-half acknowledged that they had earned money in the past selling drugs, they all seemed to agree that selling drugs was not a responsible choice for a father, although many of them still felt the pull of the drug economy and rarely judged or blamed those who partook in it.

Poverty and economic family instability do not cause poor parenting, but it certainly creates and exacerbates stresses and strains on families, as many of the fathers demonstrated in our

study. Despite income and resource inadequacies, most fathers struggled to meet normative expectations of fathering through varying familial adaptations and forms of personal resiliency. There were, however, other challenges to normative expectations of fathering related to the fathers' exposure to and concerns about violence in their lives and the effects this could have on their children.

### **VIOLENCE**

Interpersonal and intimate violence were not uncommon in the households, schools, and neighborhoods where many of our fathers grew up. Economically fragile families and neighborhoods often provided a context for this violence. Families were overwhelmingly working class, with varying degrees of economic stability, mostly depending upon whether or not their fathers worked in skilled trades. Only a few mothers worked in skilled positions. One-third of fathers were raised primarily by a single parent and less than one-half by both of their biological parents. Over three-quarters (77%) of fathers had observed crime or violence in their neighborhoods where they grew up and almost one-half (45%) had observed physical violence in their homes.

Listening to their stories, it was sometimes difficult for us to see where their families' struggles began and ended; instead, it seemed that economic and institutional problems were inextricably related to intimate violence. For instance, many of these men watched their mothers, and sometimes fathers or stepfathers, work low-wage jobs, long hours, and remain unable to meet basic family needs or to improve the family's economic circumstances. In their homes, several of our respondents described their efforts to adapt to physical and emotional abuse, occasionally bearing witness to their mothers being physically beaten by their biological fathers or her current partner. Several who were raised in single parent families recounted painful memories of seeing their fathers for the last time.

Respondents also shared disheartening school experiences, including their lack of interest in school as well as their teachers' lack of interest in them. Further, many of our respondents were raised in environments where underground economies flourished and criminal activities were commonplace. These neighborhoods were often breeding grounds for violence where our respondents honed their fighting skills. For some, prison time would become something of a "graduate school" in the violence they had been surrounded by their entire lives. The interweaving of economic, institutional, and interpersonal experiences illustrates their lives more accurately than analyzing and describing the separate pieces. The totality of experience simply overwhelmed the specifics.

Though our respondents were raised in different geographical locations, the violence often associated with poverty, the underground economy, drug abuse and drug dealing had similar effects on the lives of many of them. Street fighting, for instance, was commonplace and several of our respondents regarded themselves as good fighters. Being able to fight, however, was not as important as being *willing to fight*. Possessing the courage to resolve conflicts -- no matter how minor -- with physical force was a social skill that many felt was necessary for survival on the streets.

Using physical violence as a primary means for resolving conflicts was also regularly employed in prisons, where one-third of our respondents had spent some part of their lives. These stories reminded us that the line separating the streets and prison has become very thin in our most economically fragile neighborhoods.

The men in our study represented a range of working-class experiences. Some grew up in relatively safe neighborhoods, absent of family violence or family economic instability, and were



financially and emotionally supported by their parents. Others grew up in dire poverty and were exposed to horrific violence in their homes, on their neighborhood streets and school playgrounds, or in jails and prisons. It is also important to note that violence was not just found in racially segregated urban neighborhoods. Many of the white fathers in our study who lived in smaller cities or towns also experienced considerable violence in their families and communities.

We spent much of the third interview with the fathers in our study talking about their experiences of structural, institutional, interpersonal and intimate violence, before turning to questions about how they were intending to parent their children. In this context, many of the fathers struggled to integrate the normative expectations of fathering, which many had articulated in earlier interviews, with the harsh realities of their own lives.

### **INTEGRATING NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS OF FATHERING WITH VIOLENT SOCIAL WORLDS**

Given the magnitude of interpersonal and institutional violence shaping the lives of some of the fathers, how did they plan to raise their children? Contradictions abounded. They hoped that their children would attain jobs that paid a family wage or at least provided a more stable working-class lifestyle, and they all dreamed that their children would achieve more than they had. At the same time, they also had to prepare their children for the violent worlds that awaited them. Many of the fathers in our study not only witnessed or participated in violence of all kinds, most articulated the importance of developing one's own violent capabilities as an *invaluable survival skill*.

These fathers hoped that their children would act in a manner somewhere between the two caricatured poles of the "hyper-violent

bully” and the “nonviolent punk,” and in this way stake out a satisfactory position in their local social hierarchies. They were keenly aware of the miserable quality of life endured by the people at the bottom of their *local social hierarchy*. The specter of “losing all respect” haunted them and not only guided their own behavior, but would most likely guide their parenting strategies as well.

It seemed that the articulation of their local social hierarchy – and the fear of letting their child fall to the bottom of it – in tandem with violent life realities, were powerful determinants in these fathers' lives. Moreover, it seemed to us that, at least for a subset of the fathers in our study, *their primary concern was not to what heights their children might achieve but rather to what extreme lows they might successfully avoid.*

In short, as these socially and economically marginalized fathers were doing their best to uphold the normative expectations surrounding fatherhood and attempting to set their children on a path toward a more “successful” life, several of them also felt compelled by their own experiences with violence to pragmatically prepare their children for the cold and brutal world these fathers had come to know. This pragmatic navigation was the mechanism by which the fathers dealt with contrasting external contradictions that they had internalized. This subset of fathers was preparing their children for a ‘hard-living working-class’ world instead of the middle class, which they were often leery to even hope or dream that their child might one day reach.

### **VIEWS ON HOME VISITING AND FATHER SUPPORT GROUPS**

At the fourth and final interview, some of the fathers expressed regret that the study was ending and a few confided that they had talked about things to our researchers that they had never talked to

anyone about. For some, the interviews appeared cathartic. Several stated that these discussions provided an opportunity for them to reflect on their childhoods, their relationships, and their children, and made them aware of the value of this process.

The relationships we had established with the eleven fathers remaining in the study provided a good context for discussing father support programs. We explored their perceptions of fathering programs and their willingness to participate in one. None had ever attended a parenting program for fathers and most were unaware of programs or community organizations focusing on fathering issues. Most were aware of parenting programs and related services for mothers, but generally felt ignored, or left out of these efforts, including the NFN home visiting program. They acknowledged that female NFN home visitors had attempted to include them in the visits, but they generally felt that the program was not for them, even while they expressed appreciation for the services provided to their partners and children.

All but one father said that they could benefit from a fatherhood program. We explored whether they would prefer a group setting or a one-on-one approach, like home visiting. The fathers were evenly divided on this question. A few suggested that a blend of group meetings and one-on-one visits would be ideal.

Those preferring group meetings liked the idea of making connections with and learning from other fathers. They suggested that a group setting would also build a stronger sense of community allowing one another to see that they are not alone in their struggles to be effective fathers.

Some of those preferring one-on-one relationships said that they thought it might be more difficult for the fathers to be open and

honest in a group setting. Further, they expressed concerns about finding reliable transportation to attend a support group.

Irrespective of whether they preferred home visitation or a group, they all agreed that the staff member needed to be not only a male, but a father who had personal experience raising children. During the debriefing period of the last interview, several of the fathers indicated that they had surprisingly few people to talk to about life issues and concerns. For several, the interviewer fulfilled that role, albeit temporarily. They wanted empathetic and supportive listeners, with the capacity to understand their lives without judgment.

When we turned to questions about the preferred content of a father program, their suggestions varied considerably. Some stated that any services delivered to fathers should have a heavy focus on financial management and life skills development. Some felt that job training and placement were essential, and some felt strongly that the program needed to address the issue of jobs and criminal records.

Interestingly, a smaller group believed that learning about child development and nurturing parenting skills should be included, and only then, *along with* financial management skills.

Finally, a few of the fathers also talked about their problems with their wives or partners and stressed the importance of learning better communication skills, relationship coping mechanisms, and co-parenting strategies.

We believe that our respondents were struggling with a variety of issues that could indeed be addressed by a father program, whether a home visitation program or a parenting support group.

Nonetheless, *expectations for participation and outcomes should be modest*. It was difficult to maintain contact with the fathers in our study due to their life circumstances. Moreover, one-on-one relationships were not easy to establish. Many of the fathers who provided their contact information did not follow through with the first interview and many of those who did were clearly uncomfortable when our researchers arrived at their homes. The reality of someone coming to one's home to talk about personal issues can feel threatening, and the level of intimacy that this involves can be uncomfortable, especially, we suspect, for men. Father support groups, as we have seen, raise their own challenges. Erratic work and family schedules, along with transportation problems are impediments to participation. Still, given the nature of the relationships that our interviewers established with many of the fathers, the range of parenting, relationship and employment concerns that were expressed, and the fathers' desires and struggles to be good parents, we believe that father programs would be a good investment.

## **CONCLUSION**

The life struggles of the fathers in our study are complex, ranging from employment concerns and family financial problems, to navigating violence, to relationship issues, to the dual preoccupation of preparing children to achieve more than they did in school and careers, while at the same time preparing them for hard-living working-class lives. Being a parent may not be easy for anyone in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it is certainly difficult and challenging for men closer to the social and economic margins.

The fathers shared a great deal about their lives with us, and for that we are grateful. But what can we recommend that might bring some modicum of relief to their lives and might create safer, healthier environments for their children? Many of the problems are large

scale problems -- systemic in nature -- such as poor job opportunities, housing inadequacies, violent neighborhoods, limited (and often unpaid) educational and job training opportunities, and punitive employer and state policies regarding former prisoners. These are big issues that require big answers, bold leadership, and political will, that are unfortunately beyond the scope and capacity of our study. Our research challenge was to see if we could parlay the insights learned from the fathers in our study into recommendations for parenting support programs that might be useful to the Children's Trust Fund, now a division of the Department of Social Services. Narrowing our focus, we can offer some program recommendations based on the lessons learned from our research, but we do so, with the added caveat that parenting and family issues are nonetheless interrelated to these larger structural issues and therefore cannot be entirely separated conceptually or programmatically.

### **PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. The lives of the father in our study are no less complex than the rest of ours, but their complexity is defined by their social locations. As such there are a wide range of issues that they are struggling with, including any combination of income and resource problems, job opportunities, the lack of parental role models, masculine identities and feelings of emasculation, racial and class prejudice, criminal histories, violent dispositions, social exclusion, parental rejection, internalized failure, to identify just some of the angst they shared with us. These fathers expressed gratitude to our researchers for the time and attention given to them, or in other words, for being empathetic listeners, supportive, and nonjudgmental. We believe that fathers might benefit from similar relationships with a trained male home visitor. We are not suggesting, however, that these are easy relationships to establish. Men may fear the intimacy involved in sharing their lives with another man. However, we do feel, based

upon our experiences, that attention to this discomfort can help to diminish it, and that with time, trusting relationships can develop. We also believe that the characteristics of the home visitor and his skills at connecting with other men are centrally important. When we convened our research team, we were careful to select young men with working-class backgrounds, who met the criteria of what we called the 3 S's – they needed to be Smart, Sensitive, and to have some Street familiarity. Similar criteria might be included in hiring home visitors.

2. Home visitors are not trained counselors, but their understandings of working-class lives and poverty, and of racial and ethnic dynamics, as well as their language styles, their bi-cultural class experiences and skills may enable them to perform the role of the cultural broker, in which they may help fathers better navigate dominant institutions. In this respect, we recommend that home visitors become *advocates* for the fathers they work with, particularly in helping them negotiate the courts, child support enforcement, prospective employers, workforce training agencies, banking and financial institutions, state agencies, and mental health organizations.

3. Fathers expressed an interest in learning to create and sustain open communication with their children in efforts to guide and nurture them. At the same time, they emphasized the importance of their role in disciplining children so that they learn to respect their parents, as well as other adults and authority figures, and learn right from wrong. Establishing parental routines that both nurture and discipline children as a means for creating a structure for healthy child development is a tremendous parenting challenge. The fathers in our study are seeking this challenge, but often doing so without positive father figures to model. We recommend that parenting groups with skilled male group facilitators, who are fathers

themselves, be established for fathers to voluntarily participate in. Learning nurturing parenting strategies and disciplinary practices, which include alternative strategies to corporal punishment, should be central objectives of the group. Fathers expressed a strong interest in learning from other fathers.

4. As much of the report detailed, fathers with extensive exposure to institutional and interpersonal violence are struggling to integrate normative expectations of parenting with preparing their children for violent social worlds. This is a difficult program challenge. How do we change parenting styles without changing the social environments from which child-rearing strategies are derived? After all, teaching children violence was often viewed as a means of reducing violence in their lives and as a form of self-protection, which are both valued parenting objectives. We recommend that a group facilitator work with a martial arts instructor in addressing the issues of violence, self-discipline, and self-protection in a father's group. In addition to the value of teaching a philosophy of self-defense in these contexts, we also believe that in order to navigate violent social spaces, children may indeed need to learn the codes that govern street violence, and any effective program strategy will need to corroborate these parental concerns. Of course, ultimately, the goal should be to teach people skills that would promote community organization and empowerment to democratically address resource inadequacies in their families and communities. The latter may or may not be outside the scope of a parenting program, and, would, at the very least, need to be supported by outside groups engaged in similar efforts.

5. Finally, many of the fathers in our study shared with us problems they were having in their relationships with the mothers of their children. Resource issues were often at the root of these problems, but concerns about intimacy, trust, power, control, volatility, and



infidelities also were mentioned. With a divorce rate hovering around 50 percent in the U.S. and a burgeoning marital and couples counseling industry, it is clear that the poor and working class are not the only ones struggling with intimate relationships. Many of the fathers in our study, however, also harbored the burdens of coming from families in which domestic abuse, family instability and disruption had occurred. On this issue, we could not agree more with the observation made by Ray, the father who pointed out that low income couples can rarely afford counseling like couples from the wealthier classes, and usually do not get professional assistance until they are mandated by the courts. Program collaborations with couple's counselors would be recommended, especially if lower rates could be negotiated and/or state subsidized, so that relationship issues could be voluntarily addressed before they reach a point of no return.

This is the third and final report on the Nurturing Families Network (NFN) father involvement study.<sup>1</sup> We began recruiting and interviewing fathers in the winter of 2008. Working directly with selected NFN program sites, we received contact information for 87 fathers and secured agreements with 35 fathers to participate in the study.<sup>2</sup> Due to budget constraints, we discontinued our efforts to reach more fathers during the summer of 2009.<sup>3</sup> Researchers met with each of the 35 participants and explained the study and answered questions before acquiring consent from the fathers to participate.

Interviewers went to extraordinary lengths to maintain contact and conduct subsequent interviews. Phone contacts were made regularly during the intervals between interviews; however, many of the fathers ran out of minutes on their cell phones during the month and had to wait until further payments could be made, or else had phones permanently shut off. Several borrowed phones from family members to make calls, which contributed to our challenge of maintaining contact, while others moved households and, in few cases, moved out of the state to take new jobs. For instance, one father called his interviewer after a significant absence to apologize for losing contact, but explained that he was calling from Maine where he had found work. In several cases, when cell phones were shut off, fathers separated from the mothers, or the families moved without notice, fathers were successfully tracked through the assistance of program staff – indeed, we are very thankful for their

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<sup>1</sup> See T. Black, E. Harris, and M.S. Walker, *Nurturing Families Network Father Involvement Study: Six-Month Interim Report*, Center for Social Research, University of Hartford, December 15, 2008 and T. Black, M.S. Walker, and S. Keyes, *Nurturing Families Network Father Involvement Study: Eighteen-Month Interim Report*, Center for Social Research, University of Hartford, January 5, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Sites were selected to create a racially, ethnically, and geographically diverse sample.

<sup>3</sup> In addition, we also discontinued our plan to observe NFN father programs and to conduct an ethnographic study of fathers.

efforts and their endurance of our impositions over the past two years.

At the end of our journey, we had completed second interviews with 21 fathers (60%); third interviews with 17 fathers (49%), and fourth interviews with 11 fathers (31%).

As we documented in prior reports, our sample represented a diverse group of men who had children participating in the NFN home visiting program. Our respondents were from 13 program sites throughout the state and lived in 16 different cities and towns in Connecticut. Similarly, their ages ranged from 18 to 49 years, with a median age of 25 years. The population was racially and ethnically diverse, with 40% Latino, 26% white, 17% black, 14% bi- or multi-racial, and one Asian Indian father. Experiences also varied considerably in terms of their family backgrounds (especially whether their biological fathers had been present) as well as their educational achievements, arrest and incarceration histories, employment histories, and prior experiences as fathers. In short, we believe that our sample of 35 fathers reflected a rich array of life worlds and experiences from which to draw important lessons. In this report, we begin with a short summary of the fathers' social and demographic characteristics, before turning to six thematic areas. First, we report on the men's expectations and concerns about fatherhood, especially their hopes and dreams for their children, their fears, as well as their parenting strategies. Next, we examine issues concerning their relationships with the mothers of their children, identifying tensions and stresses in their relationships and how these were being addressed. Third, we provide a detailed discussion of family economic issues, ranging from fathers who were employed in full-time jobs to those who were unemployed. Next, we examine the fathers' experiences with institutional and interpersonal violence and follow this with a section on the difficulties that many

of the fathers were having in integrating more normative (or mainstream) expectations of fathering with preparing their children for violent social worlds. Finally we conclude the report with a discussion of fathers' views and attitudes about fathering programs.

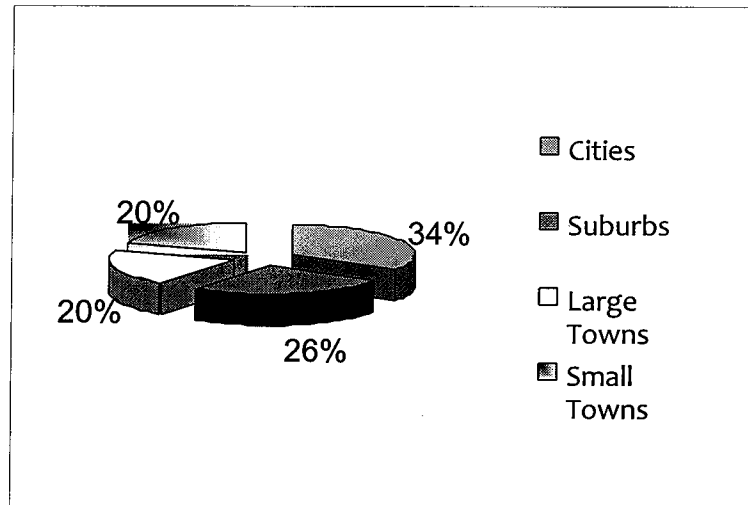
### **SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES**

As mentioned above, social characteristics of the 35 fathers varied along several dimensions. Living in 16 different cities and towns in Connecticut, 34% lived in a city, 26% in a suburban town, 20% in a large town, and 20% in a small town (see Figure 1).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cities had a population of at least 100,000, while large towns had between 50,000 and 100,000, and small towns a population of less than 50,000. Suburbs were towns in the surrounding area of a city and were not classified by size.

**Figure 1: Where Fathers Reside in Connecticut**

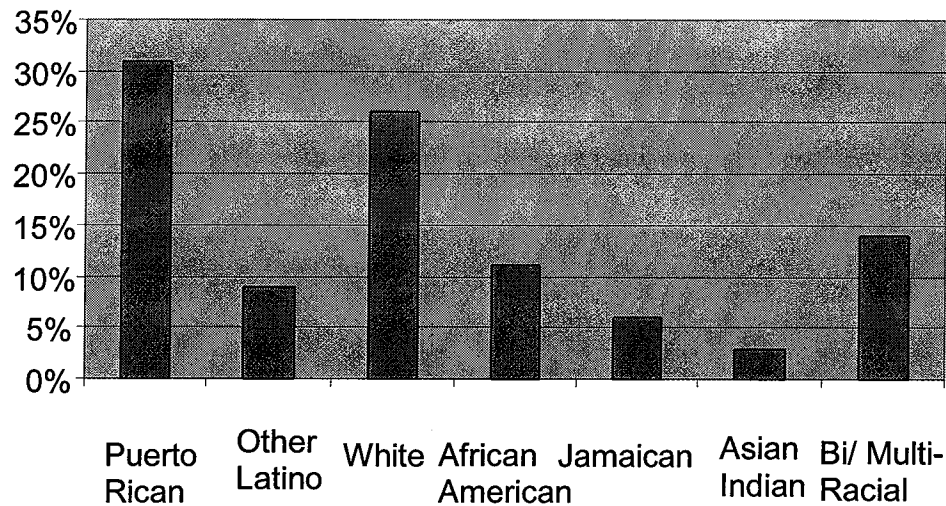


The sample is also racially and ethnically diverse -- 31% of fathers are Puerto Rican, while 9% belong to other Latino groups, 26% are white, 11% African American, 6% Jamaican, 3% Asian Indian, and 14% are identified as bi- or multi-racial (figure 2).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> We refer to these groups as ethno-racial groups, which reflect common racial and ethnic references in Connecticut.

**Figure 2: Ethno-racial Characteristics of Fathers**



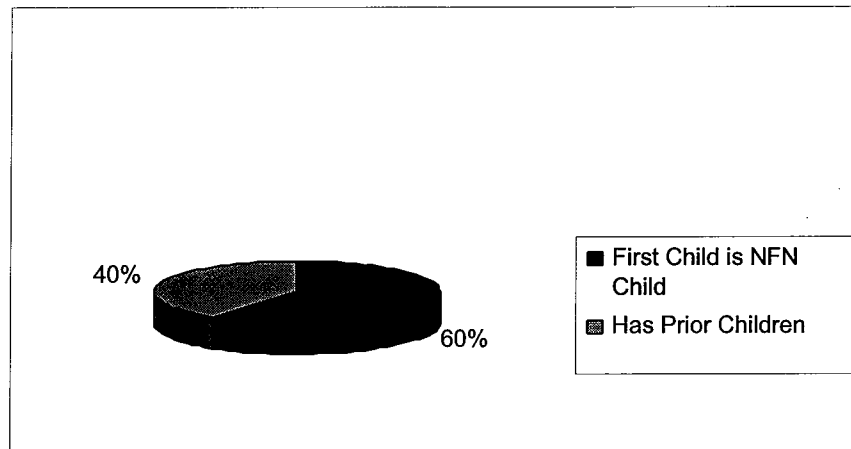
The median age of fathers was 25 *at the time of the first interview*, similar to the father's median age at the time of the birth of the child in the NFN program. This was expected since we targeted fathers as close to the time of the births as possible. However, the median age of fathers at the time of the birth of their *first* child was 20 (table 1).

**Table 1: Father's Median Age**

At Interview	25
At birth of 1 <sup>st</sup> child	20

The reason for this discrepancy is that, as illustrated in Figure 3, 40% of the fathers had prior children. As we discussed in the 18-month report, these data allowed for us to examine how many of the fathers had become both present fathers to recent children and absent fathers to earlier children.

**Figure 3: Fathers with Previous Children**



As shown in Figures 4 and 5, most of the fathers in our study were living with the target NFN child at the time of the first interview (around 90%), and all of these but one with the mother of the child, while only 9% were living with previous children.

**Figure 4: Fathers Living with NFN Target Child**

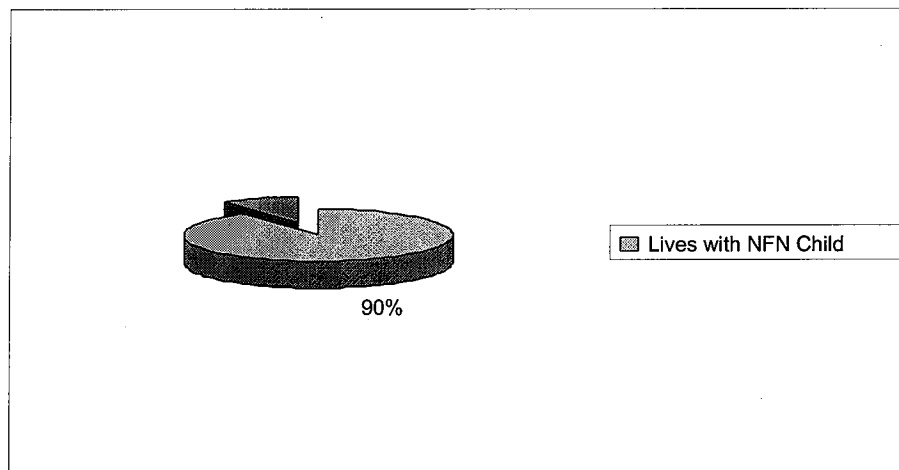
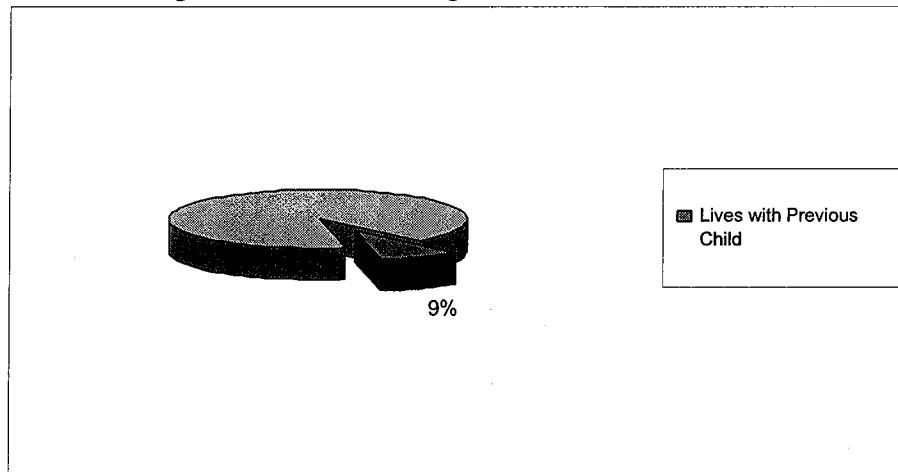
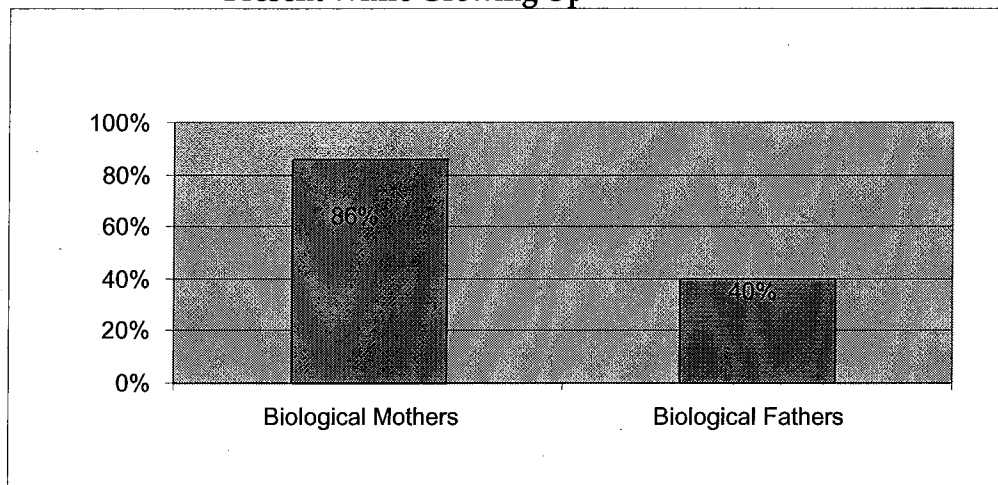


Figure 5: Fathers Living with Previous Children



Examining the family background of fathers, we found that biological mothers were always present in 86% of their lives while they were growing up; biological fathers were always present in only 40% of cases (see figure 6 below).

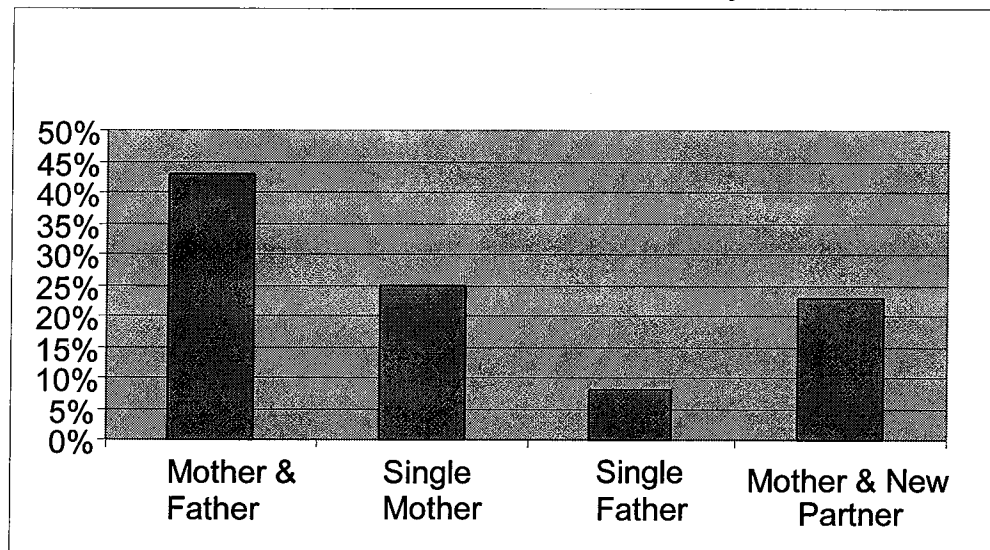
Figure 6: Percent with Biological Parents Always Present While Growing Up



As shown in Figure 7, 43% of fathers indicated that they were *primarily* raised by both biological parents. In 25% of cases, they were primarily raised by a single mother and in 8% of cases by a single father, while 23% of fathers indicated they were mostly raised by a mother with a new partner.

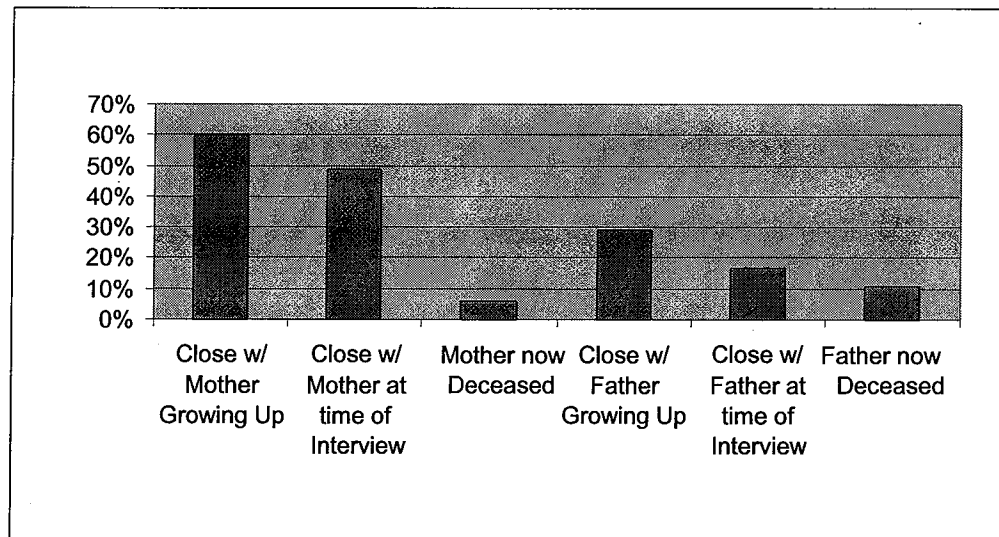


**Figure 7: Type of Household Father was Primary Raised In**



Only 29% of the fathers' biological parents were cohabiting at the time of the interview. Sixty percent of fathers indicated they had a close relationship with their biological mothers growing up and 49% responded that they were still close to their mothers (6% were deceased). Only 29% of fathers responded that they had close relationships with their biological fathers growing up, while 17% indicated their relationships were close at the time of the interview (11% of fathers were deceased; see figure 8).

**Figure 8: Percent with Close Relationships with Biological Parents**



The variation in social-demographic characteristics, family backgrounds, and exposure to biological and stepfathers provided a rich sample of fathers from which to explore parenting issues.<sup>6</sup>

### **RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN**

Relationships with children have been an on-going theme throughout the course of our interviews. In our last report we documented the importance our fathers placed on being a financial provider and cultivating a safe home environment where their children could grow and be “successful.” However, fathers also expressed trepidations about their lack of parental experience and, in many cases, about the lack of father role models in their lives. In this report, some of the same themes emerge, although extended conversations revealed even deeper concerns about their children’s prospects for the future.

### **Hopes, Dreams, and Fears**

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<sup>6</sup> All of the names used in the report are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of our respondents.

Many of our respondents expressed a version of the American Dream that children should achieve a higher social status than their parents. For most fathers, their hopes that their children would do better than they had done was expressed in specific terms. For those who had been incarcerated, they hoped their children would avoid prison; for fathers who had struggled with drug addictions, they wished their children would stay away from drugs; for fathers who did not graduate high school, they wanted their children to graduate; and for fathers who did not attend college, they wanted their kids to pursue college.

Most fathers saw education as the key to their children's futures. They emphasized the importance of education and wished that their children would reach adulthood with the ability to attain gainful employment that would free them from dead end jobs and "the struggle" more generally. J, a father who achieved his GED while incarcerated, communicated his hopes for his daughter's education in a typical manner.

*"To be smart ... not like genius smart, but like smart. I want her to go to college and shit like that. I never got to go to college. ... I graduated from high school, that's about it. I want her to do something with her life."*

Many fathers held onto these hopes for their children even as their own lives were falling apart. Jack, a 23-year-old father of two children, expressed his hopes for his son this way.

*"Hopefully he'll do way better things than what I did. I never graduated. I want him to graduate from school and go to college and do what he wants to do for his career. ... I want him to do good."*

Jack is one of our respondents who completed four interviews. He did not finish high school and, despite training in pasting billboards,

remained unemployed during the course of our study. Moreover, by the fourth interview, he and his children's mother had separated, leaving him virtually homeless. Like many of our fathers, Jack desperately wanted more for his children than he had and he articulated the more commonly understood way of getting it — through education and career. His misfortunes, however, were having leveling effects on his own life ambitions and were forging a widening gap between his hopes and his reality.

Other fathers appeared more aware than Jack of the limiting effects that social class status would have on their children. While these fathers expressed similar hopes that their children would obtain college educations, they also communicated the sober reality that their children were not born into families where this would be easy. Robert recognized his class disadvantages and saw the opportunity structure for his son accordingly.

*"... rich people ... got it made because you are with the right people. ... You damn well know the President's kids some day are going to be mayors and shit because they are already in the clique. You got normal people that live normal lives like that average American, pretty much you are stuck working in a factory and shit. ... All I make is \$35,000. How the fuck am I going to put my kid in college? The best way to go is the military."*

Robert, his father and his brother had all been in the Navy, but none of them had attended college after their military service. Robert saw the military as a practical option for his son to acquire dignity without sacrificing working-class humility.

*"I don't want him to be a bum on the street. ... I don't want him to be really wealthy [either]. I mean if he is just making ends meet when he has a family, that's fine - if it don't bother him. I would rather him have a little more money than the average American but I don't want him to be rich."*

*Because I don't like rich people because they are all snobs. ... If he graduates school and he can't find a job I am going to pressure the issue, 'Join the military.' It's guaranteed work and you won't get fired."*

Several fathers, however, saw the harsh realities of their own lives as real threats to their children's futures. While discussing their hopes and dreams for their children, their fears often surfaced. Several feared that their children would not experience social mobility and would, instead, reproduce "hard-living working-class" lives.<sup>7</sup> Not only had many fathers in our study experienced neighborhood violence growing up, but more than 80% in the second and third interviews had observed violence or crime in the neighborhoods where they currently lived. They expressed two related concerns for raising their children. The first was the fear that their children would, for any number of reasons, succumb to illegal activities in the neighborhood. The second invoked the all-too-familiar horror story of becoming an innocent victim of street violence.

In terms of the former, fathers worried that their children would be arrested for selling drugs or stealing, and several acknowledged that selling drugs can be a route to acquiring respect in their neighborhoods. Nathan, a father of two boys, who has served time in prison and has been street involved, explicitly described the drug dealer appeal in his economically depressed neighborhood.

*"[A] drug dealer is like a ... rap star or basketball player. ... He even ain't got to be the biggest drug dealer. As long as he making some type of money. ... basically you are in the position of power. ... That's just how dudes live."*

While some fathers worried about their children succumbing to the lure of the street, their greatest fear seemed to be that their children

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<sup>7</sup> This concept is taken from Joseph T. Howell, *Hard Living on Clay Street*, Doubleday, 1972.

would become a drug addict or an alcoholic and live a truly disreputable lifestyle to sustain their habits. Carlos, a 28-year-old father of two shares his thoughts on alcohol and drug abuse.

*"What I don't like at all is alcohol, drugs, none of that. ... [I've seen] the effects of alcoholism ... and seeing a person like that, well, I pity them and that's what I don't want for my children."*

Others feared street violence and its unpredictability. Eddie, a 49-year-old father of two, shared his fears about street violence.

*"I'm afraid of ... gangs and there are so many criminals in the street and they are shooting at just anybody, the innocent, that's my fear, that they might confuse him with someone and they kill him. ... There have been kids taking guns to schools."*

A friend of Eddie's had lost a child this way, so the fear cut close to home.

Fathers often expressed different fears for their daughters. For sons, they feared gangs and drugs; for daughters, they were concerned about early sexual activity, predatory men, and the stigma of teen pregnancy. Here the fathers' role as family protector or, as we have described in earlier reports, as 'patrolling the borders' of their families, was apparent. In a few instances, they expressed different, and even contradictory, attitudes about the dating behaviors of sons and daughters. Tre, a young father of a two-year-old boy, illustrates.

*"I think it depends on what you have – a son or a daughter. ... When it's a daughter ... the father is going to be more protective of the daughter with like her boyfriends when she gets older. But then like when it's a son it's like 'Yeah, you got a girlfriend! Yeah!'"*

For many fathers, adolescent pregnancy was their greatest fear for their daughters, suggesting that the stigma of the “teen mom” was viewed as a failure of parenting, even though about a third of them had been teen fathers themselves. Rex, a father of two daughters, stated very candidly how many of our fathers felt about adolescent pregnancy.

*“I am going to do my best to not let them be a young mama. I think that’s important. That’s going to be like almost like number one ... because I don’t want my damn daughters ... any one of them ... pregnant at 15 or 17 or 18. I want them to be like in their mid 20’s or late 20’s if they can help it. ... I am going to imbed it in their head because it’s crazy the way these young girls today are all pregnant. I ain’t saying that’s bad, but that’s bad.”*

When talking about their daughters and early pregnancies, several fathers expressed fears that their daughters would acquire a reputation for being sexually promiscuous at an early age and become a target for predatory men – what George referred to as becoming “nasty little girls.” For George, a young father of two girls, these very young mothers symbolized the worst outcome for daughters.

*“... that she’ll end up like all these nasty little girls you know what I am saying? All these girls who are young having like babies. Having babies at 14, 13. That’s wild ... you really are a child. ... That’s my worst fear.”*

George placed the greatest onus for managing this situation on himself as a father.

*“I got to be the first man she ever loves, you know what I mean? Her father ... I got to treat her like every man should treat her. ... She is a princess. She is a queen. She got to be treated right, you know what I mean ... so she*

*knows what to expect from a man ... when she is old enough to date. ... It all starts with me."*

Clearly, the fathers in our study wanted the best for their children and many projected hopes and dreams that constitute success in the U.S. – to achieve a college education and a career. They were, of course, also concerned about barriers to success, and their fears and anxieties were organized around these barriers. Like George, many were considering the role that the father plays in facilitating their children's success, but in doing so, they were also wrestling with the limits of what a father can and cannot do.

#### The Role of the Father in his Child's Success

As fathers shared their hopes and dreams for their children, we inquired further into whether they considered children's "success" a marker of good parenting. There were a range of perspectives from the most obvious -- "Yes, definitely" – to more thoughtful, nuanced explanations that included an awareness of other influences on children outside of the home.

James, a respondent who grew up primarily in the care of his grandparents due to his father's absence and his mother's alcoholism, imagined the importance a nurturing parent can play in a child's life.

*"... you see a lot of kids today ... and you always see kids on TV and a lot of kids ... with the love and care and a good upbringing, the child goes places in life. ... I never really had a parent figure ... [I had] a mother [who was] really violent and drunk a lot and a family like out of fucking control and nuts ... and if I had ... what you call a family ... I believe my tools in life and my outlook would probably [be] a lot different than I am now ... maybe I would, maybe I wouldn't."*



While most fathers shared James' perspective, the question required many fathers to reconcile their own life outcomes with their parents' good intentions and efforts. More specifically, several found it hard to blame their parents for their own street lives that had channeled them into the drug economy, drug abuse or prison. When asked about a parent being measured by his child's success, Eric, a 21-year-old father who has struggled with drug abuse, placed the blame on the individual rather than his parents.

*"No, because I know some of my friends ain't got like none of their parents with them and they are doing pretty damn good. So it's just all up to the person ... like yes and no. If you have both parents and they brought you up and they teach you wrong and right I mean you are probably going to do pretty good. But some people got to learn it themselves, I guess."*

Nathan, a 28-year-old father who has served time in prison, expressed contradictory feelings about the issue.

*Interviewer: "So you think a child's success is the measure of a good parent?"*

*Nathan: "Yes, definitely. Most definitely ... hold on before I contradict myself. Well, I mean like I am not saying that if your child don't really do all that well that you is a bad parent. But if you steer them in the right direction and things go right, you know, that you showed them ... the good and the bad ... you going to support them in whatever they do. But you want your child to be successful in life. That's what you should want."*

Like Nathan, other fathers were unwilling to place the entire burden on the shoulders of parents, and many pointed to the important influence of the peer group on impressionable youth. In fact, many of the fathers who were involved in criminal activities were more

likely to attribute these influences to their peer groups than to their parents' neglect. Robert explained:

*"A child's success [will depend] pretty much [on] the people he hangs around with. ... If he's in high school and he's in the ... stoner clique ... they all smoke weed every day ... most likely your kid is going to grow up smoking weed so his success isn't going to be that good. So you can't blame the parents. It was the people he hung around with. ... I didn't tell him to fucking puff that joint."*

Kane, a 31-year-old father of two, has been street involved since his early teens. A self-described "hard-head," Kane described how he began his life of crime despite his mother's best wishes.

*"... she just wanted me to do good in school and stay out of trouble pretty much. ... That's all she really asked. ... She never really pressed me about going to college or anything like that. ... Get a good job and live life, pretty much. ... And I was always getting into trouble and stuff as a kid. ... I been in and out of jails for the past couple years. ... It started when I was 14 ... drinking ... and smoking. ... I was just hanging with the wrong people, man."*

As conversations on the topic continued, many fathers became increasingly aware of the limits of what a parent can do, and many concluded these discussions by invoking some version of the familiar cliché that "you can only do what you can do and hope for the best." This did not mean, however, that they were giving away their locus of control, only that they were searching for more realistic expectations. Sammy, a respondent who suffered some of the worst abuse from the hands of his father, offered the following strategy for raising his nine-month-old son.

*"I think that all parents have fears for their children. But I think that ... how you raise them [is important]. I think that for some, they will grow*

*apart from [their parents] ... because undoubtedly children, and all of us, come to an age of rebellion, but when that goes by we go back to the values. So I think that I will always teach the values that we teach him ... always try to be an example of them so that in the future they will do the same."*

The fathers in our sample were eager to discuss their children's futures and their role as the parent. Few relied on easy explanations, but demonstrated varying understandings of the barriers and difficulties that awaited them, and in this context expressed their fears, concerns, and anxieties about their children's futures. These discussions also invoked parenting strategies for responding to these circumstances.

#### Parenting Strategies

Many of the fathers in our study expressed an interest in being an engaged father. They were changing diapers, giving baths and seeking a parental role that went beyond the traditional family breadwinner or "provider." Many wanted to have a strong relationship with their children, one where their children could speak to them about any subject, no matter how personal or difficult to discuss with a parent. In fact, many believed that their street experiences and "bad boy" lifestyles provided them with insights and wisdom about how to navigate the difficult worlds that awaited their children. In some ways, many of these fathers imagined turning their vices into virtues. To avoid prison, the streets, drugs, predatory men, and so on, their children would only need to talk to them about it, because they had been there. Nathan provides an example.

*"I am not going to hide anything from them. I can easily show them, point them out certain people, 'This is what happens when you do this. Look at this person. Look at that person.' ... 'Look at the choices I made. You don't want to end up like that.' Nine times out of ten, they going to understand that."*

Many fathers wanted to talk about how to be a nurturing, caring and sensitive parent who listened and maintained open communication with their children and, at the same time, a disciplinarian -- what many believed was their primary role in the family. Metaphorically, this was sometimes expressed as the difficulty of being a "comforting ear" and, at the same time, an "iron fist", or as being what many described as a "friend" to their children, while also making sure that their children learned to respect their parents and elders, learned that they were not equals, and learned their place in the family. These are values that typically mediate working-class households.<sup>8</sup> Jermaine, a young father, imagined how he would walk this line.

*"I just basically want her to talk to me and have an open relationship. ... I know this lady right, she got kids and her kids just walk all over her because they look at her as a friend. ... Like me, I'll play that parent role. Like she [my daughter] knows right now I am a parent. But as she get older I want to play the friend role so she can always come sit and talk to me and discuss anything."*

Sammy reflected:

*"... being a father is nothing that is easy because it is a constant battle ... you have to love [and] be very patient ... in a clever way be able to manipulate him and guide him. ... Because you know that sometimes children ... are rebellious and all of that. ... [So you need to] completely turn into their friend ... not contradict him but tell him yes and later on deviate from him ... but cleverly ... so he can understand. Because ... when a father is a bit strong with their kids, that's when they ... do the opposite, and here they show you a personality and out there, away from their*

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<sup>8</sup> On this topic, see Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: class, race and family life* (University of California Press, 2003).

*parents, they are a totally different person. ... I feel that it's a lot of work ... but it can be done."*

J, a 22-year-old father of an 18-month-old daughter, illustrated how nurturing open communication and maintaining strict discipline can become contradictory.

*"I don't want her to be scared [to tell me anything]. I want her to tell me everything. 'Oh, Daddy, I like a boy.' Yeah? Well, don't like him. ...Change your mind. ...'You don't like the boy.' Where is that boy going to get you? He ain't getting you nowhere. Give me five reasons that you should be with that boy. And five legitimate reasons!"*

Like fathers across all social groups, the fathers in our sample were struggling with questions about how to relate to their children, to develop open and honest communication with them, while also establishing parental boundaries and a structure for them to develop into healthy adults. What may be different, however, was that for many of the fathers in our study, there was an expressed sense of urgency, if not desperation, in getting it right that stemmed from different sources: in some cases, from their own past mistakes; in other cases, from their efforts to be the father that their fathers were not; and still in other cases, from the fear that there was only a small margin for error when parenting in the neighborhoods and schools where they lived. We elaborate on this last point later in the report when we examine the difficulty some of the fathers were having in reconciling normative expectations of fathering with the interpersonal and institutional violence that, in some cases, still pervaded their lives.

What was most encouraging was that they were asking and exploring these serious questions. There seemed to be an important opening here for organizing more systemic and state funded efforts

to address these questions and for developing more empathetic understandings of the particular social circumstances in which these questions were being raised.

### Finding Purpose and Direction

We want to conclude this section of the report with a point made in prior reports. In conversations about their children, several fathers stated that their children provided them with a sense of purpose and direction in their lives. Many of these fathers had been street involved and readily admitted that their former lifestyles were not conducive to healthy parenting. Several said that having a child gave them a reason to reconsider their life choices and their futures. If for no other reason, these fathers worried that their street lives would lead to incarceration that would pull them away from their children.

Kane, a father of two, was incarcerated for more than five years of his daughter's life. With a recently born son, he spoke of the apprehensions of selling drugs to support his children.

*"I was kind of worried about that when she was younger. Anything could have happened. Because [when I was selling drugs] I had her a few times with me. So anything could have happened. ... The police could run up there and there's DCF and shit like that."*

At our last interview, Kane was working two jobs, had moved out of the city and said he was done selling drugs. Other street involved fathers saw fatherhood as a way out of street life. J, a young father who had been immersed in street culture since early childhood, told us he wanted to change his lifestyle for his daughter's sake.

*"Sometimes [it's hard], but sometimes I be like it's better for me to stay in the house than go on the street and get in trouble ... it's pretty good to stay at home and watch TV and chill with my daughter and get a job. ... As the*

*time goes by, I see myself maturing and thinking more wiser than how I used to be. ... Now I am like 'Damn, I can't do that stupid thing. I got to chill. I got a seed at home.' ... God forbid I get locked up ... I already missed like two or three months of her life."*

In addition to the desire to stay out of trouble, some of our respondents described how fatherhood had provided them with more clarity about their priorities. All had sought full-time employment, although less than one-half had actually achieved it. Most were piecing together employment opportunities the best they could, and virtually all of them attributed this to their children. James told us how he was accepting his role as a father.

*"... being able to take care of him and you got to go to all extremes. You got to get out there and do what you got to do to do your side of the parenting. You got to hold down a job ... make a living and to take care of your child. It's a responsibility in life that I didn't ever [think about]. ... If I were never to have met my wife I'd probably be ... drinking again. Probably drugging again. Probably not giving a shit about nothing. ... But something changed ... it just changed my whole life."*

We have only provided a small slice of the discussions our interviewers had with the fathers concerning their children. Hopes, dreams, fears, expectations, strategies, and life purpose pervaded these conversations. The trials and tribulations of fathering, however, went much beyond the immediacy of the fathers' relationships with their children to include stable relationships with the mothers of their children. We turn our attention to this matter next.

## **RELATIONSHIPS WITH MOTHERS**

In our second interview, we focused on the fathers' relationships with the mothers. Like any intimate relationship, our respondents described highs and lows, with the lows usually centered on romantic and economic issues. One of the highs, for almost all of the fathers, was when they initially found out about the pregnancy. They expressed great joy, but also felt an urgency to "get their lives together."

Eric shared the jubilations of a first time father, "I was happy... because I knew I liked playing with kids and especially my own would be even better." At the time Eric and his partner were battling drug addiction and he was having a difficult time finding a job. In this context, he claimed the pregnancy was an immediate source of joy for him and an inspiration to stay clean. Another father, Steven expressed similar feelings.

*"Oh, man I was so happy. Obviously, it wasn't the right time so I was scared. But I was happy to know I had a kid coming and I had to get my head straightened on and get a place [of my own]. ... I couldn't have been any happier in my life. I really couldn't. There was nothing that could have made me more happy that day."*

As Steven's comments indicate, joy was mixed with surprise, but also with trepidation. Harry told us:

*"I was shocked ... Pretty much [because she was on the birth control shot] ... [I didn't feel ready] at all. But as we started getting the baby stuff in and this apartment started having baby furniture ... then I was starting to get the feeling, 'I am going to be a father.' I kind of freaked out in the moment [I found out though], like 'What I am going to do? What am I going to do? I've never been a father.'"*



Expecting a child reframed the relationship as well, and the feelings of being a father needed to be synchronized with the mother's feelings about the pregnancy. Shared joy was common, but so were fears and mounting stress. George, who, at 18, was one of our youngest fathers, described being more at ease than his partner, "She said 'I swear to God I am pregnant. ... I was like 'Yo, relax. All right, I got you. Don't worry about it. Everything is gonna be alright.'"

George was happy about the pregnancy and explained that his girlfriend had been fearful that he might leave her when he found out about it. Instead, the pregnancy reinforced his commitment to her as he embraced the opportunity to be a "good dad." George's girlfriend, however, was not the only one to feel some apprehension. When his aunt, whom he lived with at the time, found out about the pregnancy she went to the bar. "She went out to the bar and had a couple of drinks and everything. I was like 'Damn!' My aunt was like ... scared ... she was scared."

Fears were often associated with limited family resources. James expressed the ambivalence that appeared common among many of the fathers.

*"Well there are a lot of feelings – you feel scared, you feel happy. It goes both ways because you want to know if you can be able to ... take care of your child and be able to support and you want to be able to contribute. You want to be able to take care of, like I said, bring up the child the right way. I mean I am struggling right now all the time. ... I do the best I can do, like anybody else."*

This foreboding sense of increasing responsibilities and income inadequacies was quickly realized as expectations associated with pregnancy, birth and child-rearing began "coming down the pike." While the men continued to verbalize the joy of being fathers, they

also had to weather the dual storms of income insufficiency and the attenuation of romance in their relationships. Our interviews illustrated how their economic problems contributed considerable stress to their relationships, as the fathers struggled to fulfill the provider role. In addition, romantic feelings sometimes became cloudy and confusing, or totally sour, affecting their relationships with the mothers and, in some instances, their newborns.

### Staying Together

Most of our respondents lived with the mothers of their newborns throughout the duration of our study. The proportion of relationships remaining intact, however, decreased continually across our interviews. At the time of the first interview, four fathers (11%) were not living with mothers of their newborns. By the third interview, six of the seventeen fathers interviewed (35%) were no longer living with the mothers – three had moved out after the first interview. At the fourth interview, almost one-half (45%) had moved out of the home – five of the remaining eleven fathers in the study – even though all eleven had been living with the mother at the time of the first interview.<sup>9</sup> Our interviews examined some of these relationship dynamics.

Robert, who was married to the mother of his child, spoke positively about his wife and child throughout the four interviews, but also acknowledged that he and his wife have their arguments. When asked what they argued about the most, Robert replied:

*“Probably like our financial for the most part. She be like ‘I need this and that.’ And I say, ‘Well, you are going to have to fucking wait. Because we got to fucking pay the electric bill and the heat bill.’ Most of our arguments it comes down to financial.”*

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<sup>9</sup> These data are difficult to interpret because of attrition among participants. Still the data do show a trend of relationships ending across the course of the study.

Employed full-time, Robert supported his wife, his child, and himself. Even though he, unlike some of our respondents, maintained his job throughout the study, his family still struggled to get by. On one occasion, our interviewer witnessed an argument between Robert and his wife over a two dollar purchase she made on her way home. When resources are tight, small matters can evoke larger tensions.

James, also married to the mother during the four interviews we conducted with him, was asked what his most recent argument was about. He responded bitterly:

*"Well, [she was like] 'get out and get another job. Get your shit together. Get another job. Help pay some of the bills.' Right now I don't make a lot of money right now. Maybe I am not trying hard enough but I don't think there are a lot of jobs out there to try to get."*

Despite having as many as three part-time jobs at one point, James never obtained 40 hours of work in a week during the course of the study. Without opportunities for full-time employment, due in part to a felony conviction and to health problems, resources were clearly a problem for him and his family. Despite this, James and his wife sustained their relationship, even during several months of separation that was triggered by the intervention of the state. The state's child protection services had determined the home environment unfit for the child, forcing James' wife and child to move in with her family temporarily. James felt that he was unduly targeted because of his past history of violence. The case was resolved and the family reunited, but this was a dark time in James' life.

*"I am only seeing [my son] an hour and a half to two hours maybe a day. I work six days a week. So I don't get that full around-the-clock like when he was first born and he came home. I had all these dreams ... a lot of things I wanted to do like I wanted to get up in the morning with him. I wanted to tell him 'Goodnight, I love you.' Let him know he's well loved, well cared. He knows he's loved. ... Things have changed right now. It's put a damper on my summer, my life, and things that I cannot go out and do a lot now. Because they think I am a violent individual. And the past, it haunts you."*

Harry, another married father we interviewed four times, repeatedly told our interviewer how much he loved his wife and displayed it proudly during the brief periods that the interviewer saw them together. They sustained their intimacy throughout the 18-months of our contact with him, but, like others, he described arguments over money. For Harry, these financial matters would involve the apartment where they lived. Their small one bedroom apartment had a particularly small kitchen. Inadequate counter space left the microwave in reach of the child. On a few occasions, Harry and his wife had witnessed their son placing a small toy or eating utensil in the microwave and trying to start it. They had successfully thwarted his efforts, but did not have another place to put the microwave and worried about it. For this and other reasons, their housing arrangement "made us argue a lot. But we came to an understanding and an agreement on that," Harry added, with an air of accomplishment. "We are going to move probably next year when I get my taxes back."

Harry, James and Robert are three examples of couples working through financial problems and related stress. In each of these cases, the men were working and sustaining a steady income, albeit a limited one. For fathers without a steady income, the stress of inadequate income was sometimes unmanageable.

### Break-ups

Not surprisingly, income problems affected moods and arguments between the fathers and the mothers of their children. But fading romance in their relationships and, in some instances, infidelities, also affected relationship stability. In relationships that ended during the course of our study, romantic and interpersonal problems were often given as the reasons, but were difficult to untangle from income problems.

Tre is an example. Unemployed, Tre and the mother of his child had just moved out of his mother's house into their own apartment at the time of the second interview. Tre directly made the connection between money problems and arguments. .

*Interviewer: You guys ever get into arguments about money and stuff like that?*

*Tre: Yeah ... sometimes we'll expect to have money that we end up not having and we get into it about it because we blame ... one another [laughter]. We blame each other for the missing money. But then we really don't look at it and go deep into it to see where it really went. We just blame each other and end up bumping heads and fighting about it."*

By the last interview, Tre and his partner had broken up. Income problems and persistent arguments had left their relationship apparently irreconcilable. Despite finding work by the end of the study, Tre called his interviewer to tell him that "his ex" was pregnant with the baby of another man and that he had "moved on" with his life.

Sammy was with the mother of his child for the first two interviews; however, they had separated and moved into different homes by the third interview. Sammy explained some of their differences.

*"I think it was ... well things that we couldn't agree on, work and the routine. She in reality works a lot, she works all the time and she is too addicted to work. ... We don't agree on that."*

Sammy identified lifestyle differences -- work schedules and routines -- as the source of their break-up; however, it is also likely that Sammy's inadequacies as an income earner may have generated his criticisms about his partner being "addicted to work." Sammy continually struggled to pay his portion of the rent, finding work rarely, until eventually his partner decided that she preferred living with her cousin. Romance may have dissipated around Sammy's feelings of emasculation.

In Eric's case, his drug relapse seemed to be related to his chronic unemployment, both of which took their toll on his relationship. Talking about his relapse, Eric described:

*"I guess, you know, me and like the baby's mother were fighting a little bit and I just wanted, I guess, [to] take the edge off or something stupid. And I remembered like I tried to think of the good times on drugs instead of the bad times. I wanted to just kind of block out everything so I just wanted to do it again."*

His partner demanded that he enroll in a long-term drug rehabilitation program, but then left him for another man when he was in the program.

*"She kind of moved on I guess. ... Before I went to rehab she was saying 'Oh, I am going to leave you if you don't go to rehab,' like all that. And I was like 'I am going because I want to.' And I guess during that time while I was in rehab she was going out a little bit and she started talking to some guy."*

Feeling chagrined about his relapse and about losing his relationship, Eric had nonetheless stayed clean since completing the program and was working at the time of his last interview, though still pining for reconciliation with the mother of his child.

*"[Our relationship] is still rocky. I don't know, I guess she just wants to party and do whatever she wants right now. I mean she is saying that, oh, she messed up and stuff saying like 'Oh, I should have just stayed with you.' ... But I guess since I went [to rehab] like it gave her some space to go out and find someone new or something. So now like she's still talking to that dude. I don't know ... she is saying it's hard to get away from him. But I think she is just not being honest. If she cares for the dude just tell me. I don't want to be like kind of thinking we might get together or something. But, you know, it's all up to her."*

Looking back, Eric thought that the combination of unemployment and relationship stress had led to his relapse – his escape from his problems. We had noted his anxieties around both in our first interview with him. At the time of the final interview, he and his partner had amicably worked out a situation where they shared child care responsibilities when each was away at work. He described:

*"Our schedules kind of work out. She can't have [our daughter] because she's working and when I am working I can't have her. So this works out that way."*

Even though at our last point of contact with Eric, he still expressed romantic feelings for the mother of his child, we do not know if she ever chose to reconcile, or how long he was willing to wait for her, for that matter. Fortunately, at the time of the final interview, their relationship remained amicable and they had worked out informal

child care arrangements, which was not always the case in the stories of other break-ups.

Ray was dealing with embattled relationship issues of various sorts throughout the entire study, although not always with the recent mother of his child. He spent the majority of this time engaged in a custody battle with the mother of his first child, but had resolved this issue by the fourth interview (more on this later). However, after being with the recent mother of his child for the first 16-months of the study, at his fourth interview, only three months since we had seen him last, he abruptly stated, "I split up from my ex-fiancé. I caught her cheating on me 4 times. Kicked her out." He then dropped the second bombshell, "*And I am a married man now*" ... with a woman, as it turns out, who was pregnant with his third child. Ray blamed the break-up on his fiancé's infidelities, but the abruptness of the marriage made us question his own faithfulness in the relationship.

Very few of the men admitted their own infidelities to us, although at times, they hinted at them. Instead, they were more likely to talk about their partner's infidelities, especially when relationships ended.

Rex came the closest to admitting his own infidelities and the consequences for his relationship. He described to us at the second interview that the mother of his child was constantly suspicious of him and blamed their relationship problems on her jealousy. He admitted:

*"I don't hang out as much as I used to. But every once in a while I still got to go out just to stretch my legs and see if I still got it with the ladies every now and then. ... My girl [is] finding numbers left and right."*

Rex worked hard to maintain his innocence to us. He continued:



*But they were friends though. They were friends from back in the day, back in the neighborhood and stuff. And I'd run into them and they were like 'Oh, give me a call', shit like that. And my stupid self ... I put them in [my cell phone] but [I'd] hide them under dude's names and stuff ... and she memorized my whole phone book. ... I ain't cheat on her before ... I don't like no girl that snoop around like that ... it just gets under my skin. I just spaz out. ... I get to the point where I had to leave the house. I was like 'I can't deal with you. If you want to be like that I don't want to be with you.' Plain and simple."*

By the third interview, Rex had followed through on his threat to move out.

*"[The break-up] was just crazy. It was just crazy about my whole situation. After I got my papers [for my new apartment] and signed the lease and everything, she was like 'I don't want you to move into this place. I want you to come back home.' I was like 'You serious? After I did sign all the papers and gave up my money and now you want me to come back? No, I am leaving.' We always had it out back and forth. I don't know. I don't know how it just happened. It just happened. I think it was because she started going through my phone and stuff. She went through the actual Nextel records. My bills. And called every number that she doesn't know. But I didn't care. I was like 'You can call any of them girls back. They will all tell you I ain't have no sex with any of them,' which was true."*

Rex maintained that his partner's suspicions were unfounded throughout the study, but offhand comments he made to the interviewer indicated that she may have been onto something.

We can not conclude with any certainty why these relationships ended, nor was this ever within the scope of our study. Separations and divorce are complex matters and it is often difficult to discern

the causes of disaffection. Moreover, in this study we have only the accounts of the fathers to base our interpretations. Our efforts to make some sense of their relationships, at best, would suggest that income problems, feelings of emasculation, drug abuse, infidelities, and disenchantment with the relationships may have contributed. Seeing the aftermath of the break-ups was a little easier to discern.

### The Aftermath

When couples with children break-up, they add a high degree of complexity to their lives. For fathers like Eric, mentioned above, informal arrangements suited the needs for both parents to remain emotionally and financially involved in their child's life. In fact, each of the fathers mentioned above who had split up with the mothers of their children were still actively involved in their children's lives, although Ray's situation was being mediated by the courts.

Of course, break-ups are hard and there are emotional ramifications for both parents and children. For instance, when we asked Ray if he had any regrets as a father, he replied:

*"I know this is going to sound mean but I've made some bad love choices – one being my ex. ... When she left I was ready for it. But it's devastated my two kids. I mean I was with her for four years. My oldest daughter [from my first wife] calls her step-mommy and not having her now in the picture it kind of devastated my daughters. But now having my [new] wife stepping in that role that's kind of made things better."*

For Ray, it was clearly important to have his new wife stepping into the mother's role for his daughters, even though their biological mothers were still seeing them regularly. Further, Ray told us he was pursuing full custody of his younger daughter (the target NFN child) at around the same time that he had amicably settled a custody case with his first wife (over his eldest daughter). Nonetheless, Ray

argued that there are limited resources and support for fathers who fight for custody of their children.

*"There is not much help out there for the guys trying to fight for their kids. ... Legal help? Every agency I talked to said 'Oh, we can't help you. We are set up to help a mother with a deadbeat father, not to help the father. Most fathers don't want to be in their kid's lives.' It's unusual to have a father fighting to stay in a kid's life."*

Ray was the only father in our study who told us he was in a custody battle over his recent children, but we did learn about custody battles and child support issues involving children from previous relationships.

Nathan, a 28-year-old father of two children (one from a previous relationship) had been unemployed and was struggling with child support payments for his older child throughout the course of our study. He claimed that he had established an informal arrangement with the mother of his older child, but that child support enforcement was pursuing him anyway.

*Interviewer: "Are you still having to pay child support for him?"*

*Nathan: "Well, they still send me the things. But, you know, being I don't have a steady job so I can't really pay them what they want, I do what I do for [my son]. Like I buy him things and stuff, whatever he needs. Whatever [the mother] tells me he needs I get for him and stuff like that. She supposed to be going there telling them she want the [child support] payments to stop and stuff like that. ... And we just work through each other and stuff like that. She said she was going to do it. Hopefully she'll get it in motion. I mean it's like I can't show up there because I know if I show up there they*

*are going to end up snatching me up. Jail is not my option.  
... I don't want to go back through that."*

Nathan feared that if he approached state or court authorities to resolve the situation himself, he would be arrested for his accumulated arrearage and locked up. He also believed that if his former partner explained their informal arrangement that the state would stop pressing him, which is most likely an inaccurate understanding. Nathan's case emphasizes the need that he, and others like him, may have for counsel or advocacy in trying to resolve child support issues. Nathan described to us his limited resources and the difficulty he was having in meeting his financial obligations to his two children.

*"I am doing what I am supposed to do as a father, but I don't really have the financial means of giving [child support] what they want. ... They want \$100 a week and I don't have \$100 a week. Being we got [my youngest son] it's like I am not going to just up and give up \$100 a week for [my eldest] and take it from him. He needs things. He's a baby. He goes through Pampers and wipes and his milk and all that."*

Nathan's situation had not been resolved by the end of the study; in fact, he called his interviewer for advice after we had completed his final interview, explaining that the police had come to his house looking for him. After the call, our interviewer worried that Nathan was weighing the risks of turning to the street economy to bail out his debt.

A similar set of circumstances led Charles to sever contact with the mothers of his two oldest children. Charles was well aware of the criticisms directed at 'deadbeat dads' who dodge child support payments, but he too felt that what was being asked of him, as an unemployed father, was too much. Like Nathan, he was unwilling to

deprive his newborn child of his meager resources in order to support prior children. Because of his income inadequacies, Charles refused to provide the mothers of his prior children with his address and personal information, appearing unsympathetic with their circumstances. Further, he claimed that they were acting as gatekeepers by preventing him from seeing his children until he provided child support. He argued passionately:

*"I haven't been able to keep up with child support [on my second child]. I won't deny that. It isn't for a lack of wanting to, it's for a lack of being able to ... because of my financial ups and downs, you know, unemployment, homelessness ... now I am kind of stable, but still struggling to keep the roof over my own household. ... So, obviously my other [eldest] child that I've had ... I had a little girl, same issue [with her]. Unable to provide the child support. Unfortunately, because of our conversations with [my daughter's mother] and the demanding to know where I work, where I live, all those kinds of things, to pursue having Child Support come after me and what not I've been less forthcoming with her. It's like, 'Look, I am trying to do the best I can. I'd like to have a part in her life. I'd like her to know my new child. I am willing to help out with diapers and things as I am able to. But financially I just can't handle having child support garnish my paychecks before it comes into my home when I am barely paying my rent.' She is like 'Well, you just don't want to help at all. You are trying to get out of it.' It's like, 'Look, if you are willing to just drop the drama and let us all be in touch with each other and the kids know each other ... because it's not fair to them for us to not let them know each other ... [then] great. If not, I got to leave it where it is.' And I really hate that because now it's getting to be all about money and it shouldn't be about that. I understand it's hard, you know, raising a child. I have one. And, yes, financially speaking child support helps. But there is another child who is going to suffer if you force it. It's one thing to get what you can get as it's available. It's another thing to take because you want for you only and not be considerate of the other side. In all honesty, I think that that's an area that the child support system*

*doesn't address. They look at 'Well, oh, you have these kids and you are responsible for them so we are going to take the money.' And it's like 'Well, look at the children that are in the home that the father has also. It's like make sure he can provide a roof over their head.' Find a way of balancing things out. ... Whereas when the system takes more than what [a guy] can afford to keep a roof over his family's head, it forces us into situations where we look like deadbeats because we are not giving the information as to where we live or where we work or whatever. It's not that we don't want to provide. It's that we are being forced into a situation of choosing our home and what's immediately around us or what we are not allowed to be a part of. So, it's tough. How do you balance both sides? How do I be a good father and husband in the home that I am in and not be a deadbeat to the home that I am not in, you know?*

Charles' angst was on full display and is representative of many low income fathers with children from different relationships in Connecticut and across the nation. At the very least, these fathers might benefit from legal advocacy and support to help resolve their custody and child support issues; they may also need more sound public policies. Child support enforcement efforts over the past 25 years have been successful in increasing collections from fathers who have the means to pay.<sup>10</sup> However, these efforts have also drawn our attention to the large numbers of fathers, who, like Charles and Nathan, may not have the means to contribute much, if anything, toward multiple households.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The Urban Institute reports that the percentage of poor custodial mothers receiving formal child support increased from 20% in 1983 to 33% in 2005 (even though only 27% of monies collected in 2004 were actually distributed to the families; the remainder was retained by the states to pay for welfare expenditures). See L. Wheaton and E. Sorensen, *The Potential Impact of Increasing Child Support Payments to TANF Families*. The Urban Institute, Brief 5 (December, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Currently, there is more than \$100 billion that is owed nationally in child support, but a recent Urban Institute study showed that 70% of the debt owed in their nine state study was owed by fathers making \$10,000 or less in annual income. See E. Sorensen, L. Sousa, and S. Schaner, *Assessing Child Support Arrears in Nine Large States and the Nation*. The Urban Institute (July 11, 2007).

Child support policy is beyond the scope of this study. However, the stories told to us by some of the fathers point to the significance of the issue, especially when we consider that current policies and practices may be contributing toward reducing father involvement in their children's lives.

### Violence and Control In Relationships

Most of the men described their conflicts with the mothers as verbal arguments, although a few acknowledged to us that their fights had escalated to physical violence. "Hitting a woman" was generally seen as unacceptable, or even a sign of weakness, among men in the study. If they were perpetrators of physical violence they were not inclined to share this with us. One father, Rex, did acknowledge kicking the mother of his child, but insisted that he had never "hit" her. Another father, Jack, described a violent fight he had with his partner shortly before the fourth interview.

*"She was drinking. I was drinking. Whatever. We started arguing and the argument came out physical. ... They arrested both of us... [The fight] was because she wanted to go her own way and what not and she wanted me to go my own way ... and I didn't want that ... so we started arguing and all that. ... We both got a protective order against each other [now]. ... They are going to make it Assault III. Like me and her got the same charges. But I didn't even hit her. I got bite marks all over my chest from her but I didn't hit her. See, she is bruised, that from [me] grabbing her and trying to hold her."*

Jack minimized his involvement in the fight, although he did acknowledge that the fight started because his partner was threatening to leave him and he did admit to leaving bruises. According to our interviewer, the bites marks on his chest were deep lacerations, but we did not inquire any further.

Harry described his participation in a physical altercation with a previous girlfriend, but also denied being the aggressor.

*"I was raised to never lay a hand on a girl. Not to hit a girl and I won't. I been hit by girls. Girls have hit me like a dude, but I just stand there and take it. ... My last girlfriend I had to restrain her because she was getting too volatile and hitting me. But I held her down – I held her legs down and I held her arms down and everything. And she said I beat her up... [but] I am the one that had the marks on me ... that's messed up. Girls do that though."*

Fathers in our study did not generally talk about their anger or how it was manifested in their relationships, even when asked. A few did, however, state that they were aware of their violent tendencies and that they had developed strategies to avoid physical confrontations with their spouses or partners. Ray is an example.

*"I try to really hold my temper. I mean honest to God I try to hold my temper. Because of what I've seen, it's a little old switch in my head to where I won't hit a female. I put several holes in a wall because of it. But I will never hit a female. ... I have three things that usually calm me down – one of which is talking to my mom. ... Another one is I go for walks. And I actually yell at myself in my head. 'I am going to make her feel this way if I say this. What if I say this? What did I do wrong to add to the situation?' And the next one, I have a song that I listen to over and over."*

We do not know how effective Ray's routines were, but he seemed committed to them, even if unaware of how punching holes in the wall was also a form of power and domination over his partner. Ray's own father and brother have both spent time in jail on *multiple* domestic violence charges. Ray was trying to change the pattern and, for him, if a wall was damaged in the process, it was of small consequence.



Felix is the only father in our study to state that he had repeatedly abused previous spouses. He had been to prison several times for domestic violence convictions and had participated in programs for offenders inside the prison. He said it took three or four times through the program to understand his violence and to learn to manage it successfully. Like Ray, Felix had also grown up witnessing his father's physical abuse of his mother. Felix said that he had changed and had never struck his current fiancé, the mother of the target NFN child. He explained that understanding his violence as a form of power and control and changing his controlling tendencies and routines had made everyone, including himself, happier in the home.

*"I was controlling like my dad. I controlled not only the money [but] the relationship, even to sex. Controlled everything. As opposed to now, 'You are the boss. Here is the money. Whatever I make is here is your money.' I can balance money and I can write out bills and stuff like that [but] I let [my fiancé] do it because it makes her feel, you know, more of a woman than [if] I control everything. ... It's like who wants a woman to fear him, you know? Especially when you have to go lay down with that person. You really want your wife to fear you, even in the bedroom? I mean that's not cool. Not cool. You want her to give herself to you. Actually give herself to you, not feel forced to give herself to you."*

Felix described his efforts to share power in the relationship.

*"The (relationship) balance ... it's more ... not wash my hands with it, like the power, I still make executive decisions but she makes more executive decisions than I do. It's leaning more towards she has all the control [laughs] and she doesn't know it! It's more leaning to that. ... As opposed to my other relationships, I mean I started this whole relationship with I am going to do completely the opposite of what I was doing before. Completely*

*the opposite of what I was doing before. And completely the opposite has been nothing but good to me."*

Giving up controlling needs and routines, however, is a long term project and, while learning the underlying dynamics of domestic violence is a necessary first step, it does not mean that change will ensue easily or consistently. As the above quote indicates, Felix was wrestling with his efforts to give up power and control in his relationship and to adopt new routines. An argument he described with his fiancé reinforced the point. They had returned from a laundromat, where they were doing their laundry together. Felix felt that his fiancé had been far too comfortable in sitting and watching him load and unload the laundry by himself, challenging publicly his masculinity and his efforts to share domestic chores. He described:

*"So when we got home I told her 'I think you are mistaken. You are really seriously mistaken. I don't know how comfortable you've gotten that you actually let me do this by myself.' I was like 'I am fine. I am not stressing it. But are you really that comfortable. ... We are not married now. So when we are married what's going to happen when we are married?' I had to like talk to her about it. ... Here I do most of the cleaning and the housework, the cooking. ... She helps me out cleaning up, but I would rather her relax. ... So it doesn't hurt me to wash a plate. It doesn't hurt me to dust. It doesn't hurt me to clean up. My dad wouldn't do it. ... So it's like 'I don't know how comfortable you've gotten.' ... I am definitely not going to start a war over it, but, you know, it's how comfortable can you actually be? I was like 'I don't know what train you think you hopped on. I don't know what plane you are taking, but you really have to share.'"*

Felix was making significant efforts to change deeply embedded, destructive patterns of behavior, but he clearly had more work to do. Power, domination, control and masculinity were all issues which the men in our study were struggling with, even though their

experiences varied. These issues are not exclusive to our population of fathers (a point we will return to shortly); however, we believe that they are salient issues among men who have less power due to their social locations, or who have felt emasculated through their struggles to be economically self-sufficient and to meet normative expectations of being fathers in our society.

A few respondents in our study acknowledged nonviolent forms of power and control that they exercised over their partners. Rex provided perhaps the best example. He talked about giving his unemployed partner an allowance, which he decreased during times of estrangement. Interestingly, even after they broke up, he continued to provide her with an allowance, which he would then use as a form of manipulation.

Ultimately, we do not know if and how often relationship violence occurred among the fathers in our study. Further, we do not intend to suggest that domestic violence is reserved for only low income families – certainly, it is not. As the domestic violence field has taught us over the past 30 years, domestic violence is a form of power and control that is more likely to occur in families where negotiation skills are limited, intimacy is both desired and yet threatening, feelings of powerlessness outside of the home get redirected in the home, or male domination in a patriarchal culture is violently manifested within the emotionally intense and isolating confines of the nuclear family.<sup>12</sup> While physical violence occurs across all families, irrespective of race and class, the fathers in our study met many of the conditions that increase risk of family violence – negotiation skills were often limited, several felt emasculated in their roles as providers, and around one-half had witnessed physical abuse in their homes while they were growing up. For these reasons, we would underscore the importance of

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<sup>12</sup> See Angela Browne, *When Battered Women Kill* (New York, Free Press, 1989).

addressing these issues in intervention efforts that are designed to support parenting among socially and economically marginalized fathers. Ray, it seemed, would agree with us.

*“[There is a lot of domestic violence] especially with the poor ... Because people that have money, they can afford counseling. They can afford somebody else to mediate for them. They can afford to learn different coping mechanisms. But [around here] it seems to be people don’t go to counseling unless they are mandatoried [mandated] by probation. Or they don’t get into anger management unless they are ordered to by probation.”*

Certainly, fathers who maintained the coveted two-parent home through the course of our study had experienced their share of conflicts and arguments. These were *real* lives and they were confronting *real* issues surrounding inadequate incomes and interpersonal conflicts. By focusing on the stresses, strains and challenges of these relationships, however, we do not mean to diminish the efforts that most of our fathers were making to navigate hard-living working-class lives and to sustaining intimacy. Field researchers witnessed a wide range of relationships, some of which seemed happy and yet ended before the final interview, and others that seemed rocky and yet endured. It is certainly beyond the scope of this study to explain why some stayed together and others did not. It was clear to us, however, that while relationship stability involved many facets stretching across family histories, emotional dispositions, and language and negotiation skills, the economic stability of the families was central, and for fathers, finding a decent job was not only significant to their role in the family as a provider, but also central to their identity as a man.

### **JOBS AND FAMILY ECONOMIC STABILITY**

As we described in our previous reports, fathers’ economic circumstances varied – some were working full-time jobs, others

were working part-time on-the-books or off-the-books jobs, while others were unemployed searching for income opportunities in either the formal or informal economies. Despite this variation, the fathers in our study -- with perhaps the exception of one or two men -- were on the margins of the economy, often one family emergency, one lucky break, or one layoff away from each other. They occupied different positions within a tight cluster of 'hard-living working-class' lives.

We also cannot ignore the effects of current national economic circumstances on the lives of these men. Our study began at around the beginning of what many pundits are referring to as the "Great Recession," and despite claims that the recession is over, the formal unemployment rate in Connecticut has remained over nine percent for the past year, and over fifteen percent when involuntarily part-time and discouraged unemployed members of the work force are included.<sup>13</sup>

It is in this context that these men are becoming fathers. Among the 21 fathers completing two interviews, only eight (38%) were working full-time, on-the-books jobs. A little more than one-half (57%) were working at least 40 hours per week. The median wage for those working on-the-books jobs was \$9.00 an hour, a little higher than the median wage for those working off-the-books jobs at \$8.00 an hour. Four fathers (19%) were unemployed. As this suggests, many of the fathers were working at jobs that fell far short of paying a family, or living, wage and because of the precariousness of these jobs, most did not receive benefits. Interestingly, we rarely heard complaints

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<sup>13</sup> Alternative Measures of Labor Utilization, Third Quarter of 2009 through Second Quarter of 2010 Averages. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Unemployment Statistics Information and Analysis. <http://www.bls.gov/lau/stalt10q2.htm>, accessed on 12/5/10.

about these jobs, but were more likely to hear complaints from men who were unable to obtain even these poor quality jobs.

As we have already seen, family financial problems created strains on relationships. Seeing these connections, however, can sometimes be difficult because of the small, more nuanced ways that income and resource problems manifest themselves in daily lives that do not get captured by poverty statistics. We saw this as researchers simply trying to stay in touch with these fathers over time. For instance, maintaining continuous phone service was very difficult for many of the fathers, like Harry and his wife. Setting up interviews was likewise difficult. People within Harry and his wife's social network could stop by the couple's apartment to see them, and most lived close by. For people outside of their network, however, it was nearly impossible to keep up with their constantly changing phone numbers as one temporary cell phone was exchanged for another or prepaid minutes ran out before the next paycheck.

To work within the parameters of these life worlds, we quickly learned that having a phone number was not sufficient to maintaining contact. Instead, we needed to establish a good enough rapport either to acquire their permission to stop by their homes without calling or to have contact information for their wives, girl friends, or someone else close to them.

There were of course other resource problems as well, none perhaps more evident than transportation. Buying, maintaining and insuring a car is expensive, but often necessary to making appointments, and public transportation in many areas of the state was inadequate to their needs. Around one-fourth of fathers did not have a functional car in their families. This made showing up for parole or probation appointments, court dates, or going to job interviews, workplaces, child care facilities, doctor appointments, state welfare agencies, or

simply to the store challenging. Cars were sometimes borrowed, shared, or used as “gypsy cabs.” Developing parenting group programs for this population would face similar challenges.

Our effort to complete four interviews with the fathers was also challenged by work schedules. Because of the precarious nature of many of their jobs, they would call us at the last minute to reschedule an interview because a temporary agency had called, or an under-the-table job opportunity had emerged, or they had a chance to work over time. And as mentioned earlier, a few of the fathers followed job leads that took them out of the state, away from not only us, but also their families.

The larger challenge, here, is to understand and appreciate the daily grind of poverty where everything hangs by only a thread, and where the attention of accumulating and exchanging resources exhausts the day, even when there are no major eruptions. Life consists of balancing, juggling, stretching, borrowing, pleading, cussing, praying, running, and hiding in the daily struggle to navigate hard-living working-class lives. And we found that the small victories or failures, like maintaining a cell phone, making rent on time, keeping a vehicle on the road, or finding an informal income opportunity could be the difference between getting up the next day prepared for the grind, or giving into despondency and its related outcomes.

All fathers in our study considered working to be an integral part of being a responsible father, yet less than one-half were working full-time jobs. The rest were either unemployed or working one or several part-time jobs. Many shared stories about feeling alienated, socially disconnected and embarrassed that they were unable to pay their bills in a timely fashion. Even the more successful fathers working full time were often living one paycheck away from family

disaster, or in some cases one or two paychecks behind their wishes for stability.

### Family Providers – On Top But Still Struggling

Being employed full time was undoubtedly the goal of all fathers in our study – nine men had achieved this status by the second interview, even though one was working an off-the-books job.<sup>14</sup> Most of these fathers, however, were still falling short of any semblance of family economic stability. What emerged behind the simple designation of “full-time employment” was a complex and nuanced journey through hard-living working-class life; a careful navigation of perhaps surprisingly difficult circumstances. In other words, these men’s lives did not resemble the idyllic 1950’s portraits of stable working-class families with fathers employed in good-paying manufacturing jobs; quite the contrary.

Rex is an African American father who was employed full time throughout the three interviews we secured with him. He was more economically successful (and stable) than most of our respondents. Rex was employed in the Heating, Ventilating and Air Conditioning (HVAC) trade, and found that his wages were enough to provide for him, the mother of his child, and their two children (one of whom is a stepchild). However, Rex is from a poor family and others look to him as a resource. At times, he felt as if this was unfair and believed that he was seen as having more resources than he actually did.

*“I don’t know why [people look at me as a fall-back guy]. I guess because I somewhat manage a little bit right. But sometimes it’s just smoke and mirrors. Sometimes I be hurting for whatever reason. ... I already stretch myself out too far.”*

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<sup>14</sup> This information is taken from the second interview with 21 men. Eight were working in full-time on-the-books jobs, one in a full-time off-the-books job, while three additional fathers were clocking at least forty hours per week by piecing together part-time jobs.



Rex described making bail for an uncle, paying family members' rents, and buying furniture for his mother. He was trying to set limits.

*"Shit, I got responsibilities too. I can't just give you my money like that. When you can't do it you just can't do it. I don't want to stretch myself out that far where I am going to be hurting and I don't have nobody to fall back on ... it's not rational."*

Given his "deep pockets" and his extended family's needs, Rex remained fearful that he would fall short of meeting the provider role in his immediate family. He was left trying to choose to what extent, and at which points, he could help out his extended family; carefully navigating between the expectations he had for himself as a father *and* as a resource in his larger family network. Every time that Rex bailed out an uncle, for instance, he threatened the economic security that he was trying to create for his children.

Other full-time employed fathers in our study described different resource problems. Robert, a younger white father who was employed full time at a local factory throughout all four interviews, also was among the more economically secure in our study. He, like Rex, felt the stress of being a sole provider, and said that his wife would like to supplement the family's income, but that the high costs of daycare had pushed her out of the workforce.

*"My wife wants to work, but she can't because we have a kid. Okay, yeah, we can pay for daycare. Do you know how much fucking daycare is now? So for her to get a fuckin' job it's her whole paycheck. So why even fuckin' work? You might as well stay home and play with the kid ... it's fuckin' ridiculous, ain't it?"*

It would seem that unless wages offered to his wife significantly eclipse the costs of daycare, Robert will remain the sole provider in his household.

Harry, a 26-year-old white father who was married, also had been working at a local factory for many years and consequently felt job secure, even though his wages did not leave him feeling economically secure. Like Robert and Rex, he was the “breadwinner” in the home – the sole provider – and lived in an apartment with his wife and child. He articulated a higher level of economic stress, however, than either Robert or Rex, and indicated that it had created strains on his marriage. Shuffling bills had become a way of life for Harry.

*“My rent comes first. My bills come second ... no ... scratch that. My daughter’s diapers and my daughter’s needs come first. My rent comes second. My bills come last ... but not the light bill. I have to have lights. ... In the winter time ... the gas companies can’t shut you off ... so I don’t pay my gas bill in the wintertime ... I don’t. I just don’t. But also I get help paying for it, too. I get a program where I pay half and the state pays for the other half because there is only one income in this house.”*

Harry has a list of financial priorities. It is telling that he received assistance from the state to pay his gas bill through the winter, but still felt it was necessary to stop paying the bill at times to free up money for other things. Harry articulated the stress of living on the margins.

*“You got to be responsible what you do and you got to watch what you do. And sometimes I want to just say ‘bump it’ and I just want to keep my whole paycheck and just blow it. But I can’t do that. I can’t because then I’ll be short. Something gets shut off or my landlord will be mad ... someone will be mad at me.”*

Harry lives paycheck to paycheck, and if he spends only *one* of them recklessly – as he wistfully muses – there will be immediate repercussions that affect his entire family's quality of life.

Compared with other fathers in our sample, Rex, Harry and Robert have “made it.” They have full-time jobs that allow them, more or less, to fulfill the traditional breadwinner role in their families. These are the economic success stories of our study. Other fathers who worked full-time jobs were not as well off, or as economically stable, as these three.

Carlos, for instance, was a 28-year-old undocumented Mexican immigrant who we interviewed three times. Carlos' hours at work had been reduced from sixty to forty per week by our last interview, due to the slow down in the economy. He worked detailing and cleaning cars and has sought extra work elsewhere to maintain his prior level of income. Without higher wage opportunities, Carlos will meet his family obligations by working as many hours per week as he possibly can.

Eric, a 21-year-old white father whom we secured four interviews with, was another economic success story, in a certain sense, while still living a somewhat gritty working-class life. Recovering from drug addiction and possessing a felony criminal record, Eric had been vigorously, though unsuccessfully, pursuing a job for five months before we met him.

*“It's been 5 months since I've had a job now. That's probably like the longest I've ever had no job since I was like 16. ... I've been applying like crazy ... going like every day just like from 7 a.m. until like 5 p.m. just straight up, just every single place I see just stop in and going in like a suit ... with just a button-up and a tie just telling them like my whole story, 'I*

*got a kid coming' and all this. But I guess they just weren't hiring around here so I got to look more further or just look online I guess."*

He had been told by a few prospective employers that his felony record had prevented them from hiring him, and he told us that when "applying online [for a job] once you hit the felony [box] they just stop it right then and there."

Eric's struggle to find employment with a criminal record was similar to the stories told to us by several fathers in the study. We did not secure another interview with him for almost a year after his first, during which time he remained unemployed until *just before* we re-established contact with him. He described finding his new job.

*Interviewer: "Last interview you were searching for work and having a tough time of it. ... Can you talk about how you ended up finding a job?"*

*Eric: "I just got real lucky. Just one day ... I got out of [drug] rehab and like the next day ... I was going to go to the temp agency but on the way to the temp agency I saw a little restaurant with the doors open. So I was like 'All right, I'll check it out.' And I just got hired like the next day ... as a busser ... I get \$9 [an hour] plus tips."*

*Interviewer: "Overall, how many applications do you think you probably put in?"*

*Eric: "Well over 100."*

Walking into a restaurant because "the door was open" illustrated Eric's desperation. Whether due to perseverance or a stroke of good luck, or both, Eric now "clocks" slightly more than 40 hours a week. This provided him with a modicum of economic stability, enough to contribute toward some of his daughter's needs and to start a savings account for her, but not enough to move out of his parents'

home or to pay off his debts. However, the benefits of Eric's job cannot be measured only in economic terms; it also has provided him with a sense of self-respect and peace of mind. At the time of the last interview, Eric was meeting the most basic expectations of fatherhood held by those around him, and his interviewer noted that although his relationship with the mother of his child had deteriorated, he seemed less anxious toward the end of the study, which we attributed, in part, to his job and his partial fulfillment of the provider role.

Fathers employed full-time were certainly better off than other fathers in our study, but most remained some distance from the reaches of working-class stability. Most described related stress on their relationships, concerns about housing and neighborhood conditions, and fears about the precariousness of their employment. Nonetheless, this "success" is what other fathers in our study desperately desired.

#### Underemployment: Navigation Wizardry in Rocky Terrain

Underemployed fathers were involuntarily working part-time jobs, seeking full-time employment. For most of these jobs, there were no prospects for full-time employment, and none of them paid enough to support a family. In the following quote, James -- the father we referred to earlier who was feeling a lot of pressure from his wife to find more remunerative, full-time work -- described his job, its lack of advancement opportunities, his health problems and his lack of health insurance.

*"Where I work, the [co-worker that has a full-time job in my department] has been there since the place opened. I was told, 'You are in a go-nowhere position. Once this guy retires you are just going to continue being a part-timer.' There is no full-time [after him]. They ended it. ... One less they got to pay. ... I had to go to fucking State [insurance] when I didn't have it*

*[from my job] because my health reasons, my liver was giving out. ... Yeah, these shots I got to take, they are probably \$2,000 or \$4,000 [a piece]. I got them right here. ... [The state] pays for them. ... I've been diagnosed with Hepatitis C [and] I am not a needle user. But then, again, being in jail and doing tattoos, who knows. I don't know."*

At certain points during the study, James patched together several part-time jobs to 'clock' a forty hour work week; however, he usually worked somewhere between 20 and 35 hours a week, depending on work opportunities, transportation and his health needs. James expressed frustration at not finding full-time employment in all four interviews, and explained it largely as a result of his criminal record. For fathers with incarceration histories, like James (and Eric discussed above), job frustrations and disappointments were prominent themes and they wrestled with creeping pessimism, aware that in an economy shedding jobs by the millions, their disadvantages were deepening. James, one of the older participants in the study, was acutely aware of diminished job opportunities for even college graduates.

*"I remember the state [of CT] many years ago in the 80's you could hop from job to job to job. And they would never stop. You could look in the newspaper and see like three or four pages full. You are lucky if you see four jobs in there today. If you are a college grad ... I work with college grads [even] they ain't doing shit but bagging groceries ... they can't get nothing."*

James' observation about college graduates circumscribed job opportunities may be true, but their opportunities in this economy are still much better than people like James. In fact, around 5% of college graduates are currently unemployed nationwide compared

to 20% of workers without college degrees, irrespective of criminal histories or health problems.<sup>15</sup>

J was a 21-year-old Puerto Rican father, and another underemployed respondent in our study who was finding his way in a depressed economy with the added baggage of a criminal history. In our first interview with J, he was fresh out of prison, working an off-the-books construction job with family members, while still looking for standard full-time work. During the course of the next year, J obtained and lost a job at a local supermarket, and then settled into a part-time job, delivering pizzas. The job was off-the-books and, initially, his working hours were irregular. By the fourth interview, however, his hours had increased to just under forty a week and were more steady. However, his income remained low and his tips inconsistent, while he still longed for a full-time job and daily mustered the strength to avoid the lure of the streets where he had lined his pockets before in the drug trade.

Jermaine, a 20-year-old father of African American and Jamaican descent, was another respondent who struggled with underemployment. He began the study unemployed and living in his "in-laws" home, and reported feeling the stress of his daughter's upcoming birthday.

*"Her birthday party is coming up so it going to be a struggle to scrape up money. ... I don't have a job right now [so] it's going to be hard to scrape up money and get her stuff for her birthday – clothes and all that because she getting bigger. So ... it's rocky, I'll put it like that."*

By the time we secured a second interview with Jermaine, he was selling scrap metals to make money. A successful week might result

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<sup>15</sup> See Robert B. Reich, "Washington Oblivious to Jobs Emergency," *The Hartford Courant* (December 11, 2010).

in more income than some of his peers who were employed in *formal* part-time jobs, but the money was inconsistent. Jermaine wanted regular work but had been repeatedly rebuffed by the job market; he told us how even his efforts to get employed by a “temp agency” were unsuccessful and a waste of time. Through the third and fourth interviews Jermaine was still collecting and selling scrap but had augmented his income with an under-the-table roofing job as well as other odd jobs.

Jermaine’s demeanor and comfort level regarding his income sources seemed to have changed between the third and fourth interviews. At the third interview, he appeared particularly anxious about his unemployment and lack of income; by the fourth interview, it seemed that Jermaine had embraced his off-the-books “hustle.” He felt more competent in knowing how and where to get and sell scrap metals, which provided him with personal security that can only be understood in relation to his social and economic location.

*“I tell anybody as long as there is metal around I ain’t never going to be broke ... I am always [gonna] have a job as long as there is scrap metal because I will always get out here and get my hustle on picking up scrap metal to make my daily quota to get my money to just survive, you feel me?... Cats be like ‘Yo, I hate life, man. Ain’t no job trying to call me back.’ There are so many hustles out here ... go pick up cans, man. ... You see bums ... like I watched this dude, he picked up cans for three years, man. I just seen dudes ... they go in [the junkyard] ... with pure copper and come off with like \$50. ... I know if I do two or three trips, man, that’s a \$150 right there. ... Buddy, I done already mapped this out. ... This is not a game. This is life.”*

Indeed, Jermaine was so accustomed to navigating the marginal economic terrain he found himself in, that by the fourth interview he claimed to have it “already mapped out.” Beyond Jermaine’s



bravado about surviving against all odds, was the gritty reality of his life and the lives of other hard-living working-class fathers. Like many others, Jermaine longed for full-time gainful employment, but had worked out a contingency strategy for surviving a marginalized existence, especially in tough economic times.

Steven, a 20-year-old father of mixed Native American and white ancestry, left the state to seek better job opportunities after a lengthy spell of underemployment. We were only able to secure two interviews with him as a result of his departure. At the time of these interviews, Steven was working as a "super" -- or maintenance man -- in the apartment building where he lived. He was compensated with free rent, but no additional income. Although his job arrangement gave Steven plenty of time to spend with his newborn daughter, it was hardly what he desired. For Steven, a criminal record and a bleak job market sealed his fate.

*"[Finding a job around here] is harder than digging up gold, man. ... I been looking around. I've went to every place. Even stores I look in [and] I am like 'Okay, I don't fit in here,' but I went everywhere. Nowhere is hiring. And the few places that are, I mean I got a couple [criminal] charges and they are preventing me from getting those very few jobs. ... I know managers of managers that are sitting there shaking in their boots because they could be losing their job any day. I mean nothing is promised anymore."*

Again, we see that our respondent was pessimistic about the economic opportunities and conditions for those *far better off than him*. It may come as no surprise, then, that he left the state to seek better opportunities. We do not know if he found better job prospects, only that he intended to keep searching and holding onto all that he had left -- his waning hope. "Nobody should ever give up" on looking for work, Stephen insisted, "because once you give up [on that] you give up on life."

These underemployed fathers on the margins woke each day preoccupied with how to provide for their families. Incarceration histories and an economic recession often combined to narrow their income opportunities. Self-blame and family tensions ensued as they confronted an unforgiving economy, but they distinguished themselves from the last group of fathers in our study who had even more problems finding and sustaining work.

### The Edges of Unemployment: Treading Water in the Pool of Reserve Labor

As we looked closer at the daily lives and economic activities of this last group, it became readily apparent how porous the division was between the underemployed discussed above and the unemployed. In fact, many in this group adopted different income generating sources at different times during the course of our study and some had been formally employed at various points in time. What was evident in their stories was their deft navigation of limited income and family resources, picking up any type of informal work when available, borrowing money from friends or family when necessary, and moving in with or taking in family members, when needed.

Sammy is a 37-year-old Latino immigrant from Costa Rica whom we conducted three interviews with. He shared his experiences of navigating the twilight of unemployment. Unemployed during the first two interviews, he had found sporadic work as a painter by the third interview.

*Sammy: "There are weeks that I don't [work at all] and then there are weeks that it's two days, one day, like that. A lot, a little."*

*Interviewer: "And have you still been able to pay the bills and the rent?"*

*Sammy: "Yes, even though up to this point we're more in debt. Because when you can't [work] you have to get in debt with*

*the hope that when the summer comes around then I will be able [to pay it back] ... I am a bit in debt with a brother of mines to be able to pay the rent."*

Sammy worked when he could find painting jobs, and he told us that there were times when he worked fourteen hour days, seven days a week. However, this was rare. Sammy remained closer to unemployment, keeping his ear close to his informal job networks to pick up an odd job now and then. As an immigrant (we were not sure if he was documented), Sammy's problems extended beyond what some of our other respondents experienced, as he talked about employers who took advantage of immigrant labor.

*"I've worked with various Americans ... one of them... he still owes us money, almost all of us that were working there. That man still owes me about \$6,000 ... he owes a lot, a lot of people. He would put them to work and at the end [he] stays owing them. ... I felt bad because I worked a lot, we worked a lot, in fact... we worked for very rich people and we worked sometimes from 7 in the morning until 3 in the morning to be able to finish the jobs and everything. We worked real hard and then at the end [he] owe us."*

According to Sammy, this particular employer had perfected his scam.

*"... that man [that owes me \$6,000] has ... so many lawsuits and nobody gets nowhere because when he gets to court he doesn't deny [that he will] pay. He comes to an agreement and he ends up paying 50 dollars a month or twice a month to each person and then to be able to pick up those 50 dollars you have to go to where he is and sometimes you have to call him and he doesn't pick up his phone and so the people [he owes] don't even bother."*

The institutional avenues to recover stolen wages were not working for these workers. Sammy said that this type of employer sought out undocumented immigrants because he knew he could cheat them with few, if any, legal repercussions.

*"[This boss] is a hunter of the people ... that don't know him. ... With the Costa Ricans he already is famous and no Costa Rican will help him so he looks for Hondurans or he looks for other types of people. ... The majority, he looks for all of them to be illegal, the majority are illegal. ... All the people that he [cheats out of money] are illegal because the legal ones he won't [do it to them]."*

Sammy's comments about the vulnerability of undocumented workers – and the added difficulties they face – were echoed by the two fathers in our study who admitted to being undocumented. Somehow, Sammy maintained a cautious optimism about "making it" here in America, aware nonetheless that many factors affecting him were beyond his control.

*"It's really hard, but what can you do. Sometimes we have to confront many things here. ... [I wish] there would exist a more drastic law for the employers that end up owing the employees. ... I don't find [it] fair that they end up owing us. ... For me that's not fair."*

The inconsistency of Sammy's work and the maltreatment that he had received from employers left him, at times, dependent on his brother for financial assistance. His brother, also a painter, had intermittent success finding jobs.

Tre was another father who showed us how blurry the line can be between underemployment and unemployment. He is a 21-year-old Puerto Rican and white father who, at the time of the second interview, was employed part-time delivering pizzas. He

complained about the inconsistency of his hours and income, as did J, who also worked delivering pizzas. At the time of the second interview, he told us:

*"Some months is harder than the next month. Because like one month everything can be good financially ... but then like the next month you find yourself struggling and it's like you got to scrape up every penny to pay your bills. So it's like every month is different from the next, especially working part-time jobs where it's like your hours change. So you can't like expect to have the same amount of money next month as you do next month. ... One week I'll end up ... with like \$300 with all my tips and what I get paid. But then like the next week I'll end up with like maybe \$200. So it really varies. ... That's why I need like a full-time job, I can't find nothing though."*

Before the third interview, Tre had worked a three-month stint in a grocery store, before quitting over unsatisfactory pay. He asserted, "I was only getting paid minimum wage. ... You get a 30 cent raise every year [there]. ... It takes like 10 years just to get up to like \$10."

At the third and fourth interviews, Tre was working as a tow truck operator, and had moved up from being paid cash for each tow to an hourly wage. Despite ending his fourth interview on this economic "high note," however, Tre contacted his interviewer shortly after the study ended to report that he had quit his job (because, he claimed, his boss was berating him). The last our research team had heard from him, he was not only looking for another job but also facing possible homelessness because his mother, with whom he lived, was moving out of state and because he was still estranged from his son's mother.

So for Tre, who had slowly been improving his economic situation throughout the four interviews, the concluding note was

unemployment and possible homelessness. On the other side of the coin, Sammy, the Costa Rican immigrant, mentioned above, was, at the end of the study, picking up hours of work sporadically, but was still chronically underemployed. Economic journeys such as these truly show the difficult circumstances these men have to navigate.

Nathan is a 28-year-old African American father who faced more economic hardship than most fathers in our study. For Nathan, it has always been a struggle to obtain a job. Fresh out of high school (the first in his family to graduate), Nathan approached the job market but was rebuffed, he claimed, due to racist stereotyping.

*"This is when braids were in style... and people were like really stereotyping. So it's like 'Damn, you all judging me by how I look and stuff like that.' ... It was crazy like, I really wasn't in trouble as a youth so I really shouldn't have no problem with getting a job [at the time]. ... I know how to speak. I wasn't a troubled kid. I didn't really speak in slang terms, this that and the forth ... look you in the eye, hold your head up... I was judged by my appearance and stuff like that. And once I got that first felony it was ugly."*

Nathan told us that even before his felony conviction, he had no luck finding work, despite possessing what he believed was the cultural capital to navigate a job world reflective of mainstream (usually "white") cultural attitudes. By the time we met him, he had accumulated three felonies and was finding his employment prospects dim, with the exception of temporary work agencies.

*"It's kind of hard for me to get a job because I got three felonies. So if I do get a job, nine times out of ten, if I get a job it's through a temp service. They are not lasting. The little bit of money I get, child support want to take that."*

When we conducted our third interview with Nathan, some eight months later, his situation had improved little.

*"I been looking [for work] but you know ... being that my record things are still crazy and stuff like that. So patience is a virtue. I still be patient with it and stuff like that ... [I work] little roofing gigs and stuff ... whenever I get phone calls. ... I'll go out and do whatever I can, when I can, whenever they call. ... I had an interview about 2 days ago ... at a sporting goods store in East Hartford. ... But they said they would call me back but, you know, it's been two days and they know about my record situation so the best thing I can do is just wait and be patient."*

Nathan never did get that call from the sporting goods store. Nor any other store. In his fourth interview he was still without work, nearly a full year since his first interview.

*"Now it's really tough. I just blame it on the recession, my history, record. It's really tough. And I am strong because I am coping with it. I am dealing with it. Like sometimes I get the urge like I just want to give up, like not really like kill myself but like, damn, disappear for a minute like ... Damn, like ... Just go, like ... I been leaving the state like crazy. We went and helped a dude move and go to Boston. Just so I could just ... just clear my mind, like."*

Nathan's emotions overwhelmed him when he discussed being turned down by employers often associated with the worst jobs: fast food restaurants. Interestingly, Nathan had mentioned in his second interview that he had applied for jobs at fast food restaurants right out of high school, and that these were the jobs that had turned him down because of racist stereotyping. Years later, he approached these same employers, only this time older and with three felony convictions.

*"I couldn't get a job at McDonald's. You know? That's crazy! Burger King ... I had the manager sold at Burger King. They wouldn't hire me because of my record. The manager was feeling me, like vouching for me like 'He's a good dude' ... everything they wanted to have, I killed [impressed] them. [Nathan gets very emotional here and is trying to hold back tears.] The McDonald's thing was like 'This is my last resort.' The Burger King thing, I had just came home [from prison]. I was in a halfway house. I was amped up. 'Yeah, yeah, I need this. I am going to go right by this.' This was before my son was born ... I was amped. Shot me down. Just went backwards. ... I was hurt. Devastated. It's all right, though. But it's just like when a petty place ... I can't even say 'petty' ... when a place like that won't hire you ..."*

Here we can see the anger, self-loathing and overall emotional devastation that results from continual rejection from the formal job market. And even though Nathan has been a drug dealer (mostly marijuana), and admitted that the lure of the streets called to him at times, he was struggling to avoid this option for fear of its consequences.

*"[Dealing drugs] is crazy. It's not worth it, like, when you get a [regular] job its steady income. Don't get me wrong, you selling drugs you make a nice portion, but there is a lot of shit that come with it. I am tired of looking over my back and my shoulder and all that, worrying about if I am going to get robbed or if I am going to go to jail. And [jail] is the biggest issue."*

With little hope of finding formal work and weary of the underground drug economy, Nathan was in a state of economic paralysis at our last interview. To compound his situation further, he was accumulating child support debt throughout the year we were in contact with him. Shortly after the study ended, he called his interviewer in a state of exasperation because the police were looking for him. He lamented that he was trying to get his life right



but that things always seemed to go wrong, and most importantly, that he wanted to stay out of prison. It was his 28<sup>th</sup> birthday.

We were unable to maintain contact with a few other unemployed fathers after the first interviews because of the instability of their lives. For instance, Donte, a 23-year-old African American father, described his two year stint at Job Corps during his first interview where he had learned the carpentry trade. However, he had not been able to find work upon completion of his training. Several fathers on the edge had experiences with temporary job agencies, but none had anything good to say about them. Like Nathan, most railed against them for paying low wages, providing irregular hours, and never resulting in long-term solutions to their economic woes.

The unemployed fathers in this section join the 170,000 workers in the state who are now formally unemployed.<sup>16</sup> The barriers that these fathers normally face – felony convictions, poor housing conditions, limited formal education, and the lack of transportation, child care, and phone service – were even more restrictive in the current economic environment.

In circumstances like these, drawing on social and material resources is the key to survival. When these resources are unavailable, families face unbearable stress, and may lose housing, separate, and rely on the kindness of family, friends and even sometimes strangers to survive. Columnist Susan Campbell of *The Hartford Courant* underscored this point recently when reporting that one Hartford homeless shelter turned away needy individuals seeking its services 535 times in October alone.<sup>17</sup> Maintaining relationships within the family through these periods was challenging, to say the least.

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<sup>16</sup> Economy at a Glance: Connecticut, Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Dept. of Labor. <http://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.ct.htm>, accessed on Dec. 18, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> See Susan Campbell, "Searching Out the Hard-Core Homeless," *The Hartford Courant*, C2, December 6, 2010.

While the unemployed men in our study only represented one end of the job continuum, as described above, none of the fathers in our study had reached a secure place of economic family stability, though some were managing as family providers nonetheless. The inability of many fathers, however, to attain any semblance of remunerative employment had left many of them jaded, disheartened and reconciled to the reality that they must navigate poverty as best they can. Even though about one-half acknowledged that they had earned money in the past selling drugs, they all seemed to agree that selling drugs was not a responsible choice for a father, although many of them still felt the pull of the drug economy and rarely judged or blamed those who partook in it.

Poverty and economic family instability do not cause poor parenting, but it certainly creates and exacerbates stresses and strains on families, as many of the fathers demonstrated in our study. Despite income and resource inadequacies, most fathers struggled to meet normative expectations of fathering through varying familial adaptations and forms of personal resiliency. There were, however, other challenges to normative expectations of fathering, related to the fathers' exposure to and concerns about violence in their lives, and the effects this could have on their children. This is the issue we turn to next.

### **VIOLENCE**

Interpersonal and intimate violence were not uncommon in the households, schools, and neighborhoods where many of our fathers grew up. Economically fragile families and neighborhoods often provided a context for this violence. Families were overwhelmingly working class, with varying degrees of economic stability, mostly depending upon whether or not their fathers worked in skilled trades, for instance, as a plumber, electrician, bricklayer, painter, mechanic, or truck driver. Only a few mothers worked in skilled

positions. One-third of fathers were raised primarily by a single parent and less than one-half by both of their biological parents. Over three-quarters (77%) of fathers had observed crime or violence in their neighborhoods where they grew up and almost one-half (45%) had observed physical violence in their homes.

Listening to their stories, it was sometimes difficult for us to see where their families' struggles began and ended; instead, it seemed that economic and institutional problems were inextricably related to intimate violence. For instance, many of these men watched their mothers, and sometimes fathers or stepfathers, work low-wage, service sector jobs, long hours, and remain unable to meet basic family needs or to improve the family's economic circumstances. In their homes, several of our respondents described their efforts to adapt to physical and emotional abuse, occasionally bearing witness to their mothers being physically beaten by their biological fathers or her current partner. Several who were raised in single parent families recounted painful memories of seeing their fathers for the last time.

Respondents also shared disheartening school experiences, including their lack of interest in school as well as their teachers' lack of interest in them. Further, many of our respondents were raised in environments where underground economies flourished and criminal activities were commonplace. These neighborhoods were often breeding grounds for violence where our respondents honed their fighting skills. For some, prison time would become something of a "graduate school" in the violence they had been surrounded by their entire lives. The interweaving of economic, institutional, and interpersonal experiences illustrates their lives more accurately than analyzing and describing the separate pieces. The totality of experience simply overwhelmed the specifics.

Their narratives often began in their homes, where they were initially introduced to poverty, family struggles, and varying forms of interpersonal violence. A few of them recounted memories of betrayal that occurred in families with insufficient resources and where institutional constraints required them to come up with more creative ways of “getting ahead.” Todd, a 29-year-old father, recounted his mother’s exhausting efforts to own a home and her brother’s (his uncle’s) betrayal.

*“... my mother was working two jobs and going to school. She was working at this bakery ... at 5:00 in the morning ... and she was taking night classes ... and she ... was a janitor at IBM. ... She was stacking [saving] and putting it [money] in a bank ... so she could get a house. ... But being ... she had no credit ... she got the house in [my uncle’s] name. ... [He] started taking loans against the house to buy jewelry for females. ... He would go from this bank and take \$10,000 here from a different bank, take \$40,000 here and they foreclosed on the house ... and we just hopped on ... a bus and went to Hartford. ... We was living in Hartford in a shelter for about six months before we moved to Dutch Point [housing projects].”*

Aside from seeing many of their parents work years at dead-end jobs with little to show for their labor, approximately one-half of our respondents shared painful stories of physical abuse in their homes. In some two-parent homes, their fathers were physically abusive toward their mothers, but several respondents recalled fist fights they had with their mothers’ live-in boyfriends. Several respondents described feelings of helplessness as they recounted some of their earliest, most prominent memories of family violence, and some are still struggling with the anger stemming from witnessing brutally violent behavior directed toward their mothers. Javi, a 19-year-old father, spoke with sobering pain about a childhood memory.

*"Mainly it was abuse, physical abuse. ... When my mother was pregnant my father actually came one day and he actually grabbed my mother by the neck and put her on the wall and tried to lift her up. And I guess he hit a couple of punches and all that, but I was right on the couch looking at that. And that [gave] me a lot of flashbacks about him."*

A few of the men also described how their fathers' or stepfathers' rage was (mis)directed at them. Physical and emotional abuse often coincided. Jack described:

*"[Most of my memories of my father are] the abusive ones. ... My dad would always beat my ass, beat my ass, beat my ass ... verbal abuse. He just curse a lot ... 'Fuck you. You fucking son of a bitch. I regret you are my fucking son,' all that bullshit."*

While fathers often told us about the physical violence they experienced, they were less likely to consider the emotional consequences. Occasionally, they would drop derisive or sarcastic comments, often revealing feelings of rejection that were sealed in dry humor. Or they would describe memories of violence with little affect, avoiding deep-seated and rarely verbalized emotions connected with these past events. There were, however, a few exceptions. James discussed the emotional turbulence surrounding his relationship with his mother.

*"The kind of life I grew up was going to get my mother out of a bar room. ... She was like 'Well, I brought you into this world and I can take you out of this world' ... and you know like parents get like 'I never wanted you. I didn't want to have no kids.' And I was like 'Well, why the hell did you have me in the first place? It's not my fault I was born.' I didn't ask to come in this world. ... My mother really didn't give a shit basically what you did."*

Later in the interview, James concluded his thoughts about his mother.

*"I've spoke to [my mother] a while back and she has basically said there were a lot of things that she should have done different in life and maybe a lot of us wouldn't have turned out, maybe, I don't know, the way we did or the way we are. Like I said to her, it's too late for that."*

Steven's willingness to share his story about his father's abuse and neglect provided a glimpse into emotional turmoil that stemmed from intimate violence.

*"I remember when I was a little, little baby. I still remember them two [his parents] arguing and me standing in between them crying because I kept trying to tell them to stop and they just wouldn't stop. They just kept fighting and fighting. I remember my mom walking out the door. Like I got some shitty memories repressed that like I think of once in a while. And it's like 'Damn, that's why I hate [my father] so much.'"*

After his parents split up, Steven recalled a fight he had with his father.

*"... [My father] chased me down the stairs and he said, 'What?' I said 'I want to go home.' By the time I got down the stairs I turned around and he just back-handed me. And he split my lip and I just looked at him and I was like, 'What the hell is wrong with you?' And he didn't expect that coming from a kid, so he kind of went upstairs and thought about it and he came back down and he was like 'I am sorry. I didn't mean to do that. I don't know what got over me.' I was like 'I want to go fuckin' home. There is no way I am staying here.' I wanted to go home. I just walked past him and I called my mom and I told her. I hadn't seen him for about two months after that. ... He didn't even try to contact me. Nothing."*

Steven described the sting of his father's rejection and ambivalent feelings that he harbored toward his father.

*"[My father] hasn't done anything for me. ... When I was a kid I always told myself, 'Don't fall for his tricks. Don't fall for his tricks. When he calls you don't bother. Don't listen to him.' But I ended up trying to give him a chance. ... And that's the way it was my whole life. He never came through with anything."*

Sadly, for a subset of our fathers, becoming acquainted with brutality in the home prepared them for violent neighborhoods that awaited them outside of their homes. Several of our respondents lived in low-income neighborhoods and went to schools that reflected community resource problems and poverty-related family problems. Two-thirds had either graduated from high school or had completed a GED; however, only two in thirty-five fathers had completed college and only two other fathers had any formal job training.<sup>18</sup> Many of the fathers, even those who graduated, conveyed stories about racism in the schools, frequent suspensions, expulsions, and disinterest in school work as well as half-hearted teachers. Many had adopted deviant school identities long before they entered high school.

We do not, however, want to paint the fathers' school experiences with too broad of a brush. It is important to note that the fathers' accounts also included descriptions of teachers and parents who cared, school environments that were supportive, and good school memories. Neither did our entire sample attend under-resourced schools. In fact, a few respondents moved several times during their youth and, consequently, experienced different types of schools. For George, these moves crossed racial, ethnic and class boundaries and

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<sup>18</sup> The college graduates only lasted for one interview and seemed almost offended that they had been included in our study.

provided him with an unusual perspective on institutional inequities. Still in high school when our study began, George described:

*"A good school to me is like it's the environment where you are at. ... When I went to New Britain High nobody cared about going to school. ... Plainville High was a good school because everybody really wanted to learn. ... Stamford Academy ... was a problem. ... They were telling teachers [off]. ... It's a charter school ... for bad kids. [Plainville] was in a good location ... nice trees ... everything around. New Britain High is like on a corner or whatever. ... Stamford Academy is right across the street from the Police Station. [laughter] It was crazy. I am like 'Yo, this is wild.'"*

Schools often reflected the neighborhoods and communities where the fathers grew up. Some grew up in extremely violent communities, where they witnessed many street related crimes, from finding dead bodies to seeing stabbings, drug deals and drug addicts injecting themselves. Eddie, our oldest father in the study, grew up in a violent neighborhood in Puerto Rico. He described:

*"... there was crime, we couldn't go outside. ... A lot of drugs, a lot of fighting, sticks, you could hear at night people screaming. ... When I would go to throw away the garbage ... I would see them tied up...[next to the] garbage bin ... ready to inject themselves."*

Easton grew up in violent conditions in Kingston, Jamaica. He continues:

*"A lot of people from the neighborhoods get up and see people ... dead. ... It was that rough. ... In Jamaica, if you don't know nobody in a neighborhood you're entering ... to go meet you out there at the gate and bring you in ... if you don't know them people out there, it's a wrap for you. They don't care*



*who you is, they killing you. ... They killed this dude ... And the next day they found the kid laying on his father and his father was dead. Now you tell me what kind of people does shit like that? That was some sad shit ..."*

Javi grew up in a housing project in Puerto Rico. He recalled:

*"... I mean where I lived then, it wasn't safe. ... We was playing outside. And then out of nowhere straight-up gunshots [laughs] ... I used to hear all that ... that project I used to live on was really hot ... that main project was all about drugs and all that."*

Fathers who grew up in these conditions were not able to reach maturity unscathed by some aspect of street culture. Though our respondents were raised in different geographical locations, the violence often associated with poverty, the underground economy, drug abuse and drug dealing had similar effects on the lives of many of them. Street fighting, for instance, was commonplace and several of our respondents regarded themselves as good fighters. Being able to fight, however, was not as important as being *willing and able to fight*. Possessing the courage to resolve conflicts -- no matter how minor -- with physical force was a social skill that many felt was necessary for survival on the streets.<sup>19</sup> Jack, a 23-year-old respondent, spoke very candidly about the importance of fighting in his neighborhood.

*"Not every kid is perfect. You are going to lose a fight regardless. If you lose a fight with the guy, just come back to them. You might beat them the next time. [laughs] ... It's not only about losing or winning ... you showed that you do fight."*

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<sup>19</sup> This disposition is part of what Yale University sociologist Elijah Anderson refers to as the Code of the Street. See Anderson, *Code of the Street: decency, violence and the moral life of the inner-city* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000).

Another father, Todd, talked about adapting to the violence in his neighborhood.

*"Even now I still don't like violence. But growing up in Hartford I had to fight. If I didn't fight, I would get my ass whooped every day. ... Living in Hartford changed like my whole, whole attitude. Just because I went from being humble and quiet to being quiet but with an attitude. Like if anybody say anything to me, I would snap."*

Using physical violence as a primary means for resolving conflicts was also regularly employed in prisons, where one-third of our respondents had spent some part of their lives. These stories reminded us that the line separating the streets and prison has become very thin in our most economically fragile neighborhoods. Most of the fathers agreed that staying away from violence was their goal, but just as neighborhood violence was difficult to avoid, prison violence was largely unavoidable. James shared his perspective on prison violence.

*"I've seen some serious ass-whoopings in jail ... that you don't forget. ... They always tested people. ... I been in jails where there's been riots in the jail. You see 200 people on this side, 200 people on that side, people coming out with homemade shanks. ... First thing that comes to your mind? 'I am going to get mine. ... I am hitting the first fucker that hits me.'"*

Another young father, George, applied the same logic as he prepared himself for prison. George had violated probation during the course of our study and was expecting to begin a prison sentence. George explained:

*"I know [deep sigh] off rip [right away] somebody going to try pressing me. Somebody going to try to come up to you and say something, or try to take something from me. It's not going to happen. You only got one chance to make an impression, you feel me. And as soon as somebody touching my*

*shit, if I let that shit slide everybody going to think that's all right. As soon as somebody touches my shit I am going to punch them in the face. I don't give a fuck if he's six-foot seven or whatever. It's the whole principle. You are going to know that I am going to fight for mines at the end of the day. It's like whatever. I am not a little kid."*

In prison or on the street, this same cultural framework and personal disposition appeared to be present. Interestingly though, George's father had prepared him for this rough and tumble male world, where respect is violently exercised and protected, a long time ago. George recalled an incident in which he reported a playground fight to his father.

*"After that time my Pops told me, you know what I am saying, 'You come here and I find out you got your ass whooped, somebody did something and you didn't do nothing, I am going to fuck you up.' I feel like my Pops, if I go back to my [prison] cell, my Pops is going to pop out of nowhere and fuck me up, you know, what I am saying?"*

Given his father's influence, as well as influences from the streets and, soon, the prison, George has learned the importance of honing his fighting skills as a way of negotiating a violent world. When we asked if he felt these were skills that fathers needed to teach their children, George who has two daughters responded:

*Yeah. Especially while they are young, you know what I mean? At a playground you always going to get into confrontation about something. As you get older you probably won't have to use it as much, but it's just good to have, you know what I am saying, because you don't know what's going to happen. It's just like going to school or taking a trade or taking up something in school. Like you might not need it when you are older, but it's always something good to have. That's just the way I see it.*

George's quote was one of the more profound illustrations of how integral violence had become to the lives of some of the fathers. For George, the physically violent skills children would need to learn were *equivalent to learning a trade*.

The men in our study represented a range of working-class experiences. Some grew up in relatively safe neighborhoods, absent of family violence or family economic instability, and were financially and emotionally supported by their parents. Others grew up in dire poverty and were exposed to horrific violence in their homes, on their neighborhood streets and school playgrounds, or in jails and prisons. It is also important to note that violence was not just found in racially segregated urban neighborhoods. Many of the white fathers in our study who lived in smaller cities or towns also experienced considerable violence in their families and communities. Frankly, we did not expect to hear so many stories of violence, since we assumed that socially and economically marginalized fathers would be difficult to recruit into the study.

We spent much of the third interview with the fathers in our study talking about their experiences of structural, institutional, interpersonal and intimate violence, before turning to questions about how they were intending to parent their children. Many of the men, like George above, recognized the need to prepare their children for the violent social worlds they were likely to encounter. In this context, many of the fathers struggled to integrate the normative expectations of fathering, which many had articulated in earlier interviews, with the harsh realities of their own lives.

#### **INTEGRATING NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS OF FATHERING WITH VIOLENT SOCIAL WORLDS**

Given the magnitude of interpersonal and institutional violence shaping the lives of some of the fathers, how did they plan to raise their children? As we saw in earlier sections, many fathers articulated the more normative expectations of fathering. They wanted to nurture their children, keep them off of the streets, invest in their educations, and protect and provide for them. How would they reconcile the normative expectations of *fatherhood* with the violent worlds in which *they* lived?

Contradictions abounded. They hoped that their children would attain jobs that paid a family wage or at least provided a more stable working-class lifestyle, and they all dreamed that their children would achieve more than they had. At the same time, they also had to prepare their children for the violent worlds that awaited them. Many of the fathers in our study not only witnessed or participated in violence of all kinds, most articulated the importance of developing one's own violent capabilities as an *invaluable survival skill*.

James, the father who described the prison riot above, did not like to talk about violence in his life, nor about prison more generally. But he did share strategies that he had developed in prison. James talked about having to navigate between the formal rules and expectations of prison authorities and the informal codes of inmate culture. He argued that the best way "to do time" was to mind your own business and stay out of trouble, but, when your "number comes up," when you are "tested," you should participate in the violence *as necessary* so that you can preserve a dignified and respectful social standing, and perhaps even your own life.

Other fathers made similar arguments when discussing the schools their children would attend. "See, here's the problem," Robert explained:

*"If you are like fifteen or sixteen and you are in high school and someone pushes you and you go and tell the teacher, you are going to get your ass whooped [by the students]. So if you are a teenager, the only thing I can really pretty much say is posse up your boys because there is gonna be some action."*

Robert clearly felt that the stigma of being labeled a snitch (let alone "turning the other cheek") would reduce his child's quality of life so much so that going to the authorities was out of the question.

Another father, Ray, asserted:

*"I am not going to tell my kid, 'Hey if somebody hits you then just take it.' If somebody hits you, you have a right to defend yourself. ... [If you don't] they are going to keep at it. ... The adult in me says talk it out. ... I would hope that physical repercussion would be the last resort. ... Do I condone [violence]? No. Would I do it? Yeah."*

Will this father uphold the normative expectations of the nurturing father and advise his child to respond to a physical confrontation by talking it out, or walking away? Will he help his child develop the interpersonal communication skills needed to deal with conflict in a manner that can deftly mediate one's physical reactions to fear or confrontation? Or will he advise his child to do what he would do and what he has done and respond to violence in kind? Tre articulated what appeared to us to be a general consensus among the fathers about how to navigate these competing expectations.

*"I'll teach him to defend himself, but I ain't going to teach him to just be like a bully. ... I am not saying I want him to run away and be a punk about everything ... but I don't want him to throw his life away because he's out there ... looking for fights."*

These fathers hope their children can act in a manner somewhere between the two caricatured poles of the “hyper-violent bully” and the “nonviolent punk,” and in this way stake out a satisfactory position in their local social hierarchies. For these men, violence can be seen as social currency in its own right; however, they also know first hand that violence can also be a legal liability, and result in arrest and perhaps even incarceration. It seemed that only a nuanced navigation of these contradictions would help their children avoid the pitfalls of violence – physical injury or prison -- and avoid the stigma of the “punk”.

Be that as it may, their stories were replete with instances where they successfully used violence to avoid becoming a “punk” and to pragmatically navigate violence in their own social worlds. Nathan spoke about the consequences of “trouncing his opponent” in a fight after he moved to a new neighborhood in Hartford.

*“I left him laying there. One good one knocked him out. That’s it ... that’s been two years ago. Ever since then [everybody] that don’t know me, they done seen: ‘He [ain’t] no joke.’ ... I mind my business, you mind yours.”*

In this instance, one good showing of violence in a new neighborhood bought the respondent two years of peace and counting.

The strategy he used was a strategy he and several others in our study had employed successfully time and time again. These men generally believed that although everyone will face violence from time to time, the frequency and magnitude of it will be drastically affected by one’s initial response to it. In other words, they aimed to not only deal with this one situation they were confronted with at that moment, but to respond in a way that addressed the pervasive atmosphere of violence in which they lived.

Whether in prison or their own neighborhood, these men made it clear that without a strong initial showing one would likely become a permanent victim of abuse. These fathers were keenly aware of the miserable quality of life endured by the people at the bottom of their *local social hierarchy*, and they did not feel that these individuals were likely to ever rebound. The specter of “losing all respect” haunted them and not only guided their own behavior, but would most likely guide their parenting strategies as well.

It seemed that the articulation of their local social hierarchy – and the fear of letting their child fall to the bottom of it – in tandem with violent life realities, were powerful determinants in these fathers lives. Moreover, it seemed to us that, at least for a subset of the fathers in our study, *their primary concern was not to what heights their child might achieve but rather to what extreme lows they might successfully avoid*. This gets to the root of the matter; these fathers were likely to develop a pragmatic parenting philosophy that was more concerned with navigating the most dangerous social and economic pitfalls in their environments rather than achieving some distant normative ideal.

In short, as these socially and economically marginalized fathers were doing their best to uphold the normative expectations surrounding fatherhood and attempting to set their children on a path toward a more “successful” life, several of them also felt compelled by their own experiences with violence to pragmatically prepare their children for the cold and brutal world these fathers had come to know. This pragmatic navigation was the mechanism by which the fathers dealt with contrasting external contradictions that they had internalized. This subset of fathers was preparing their children for a ‘hard-living working-class’ world instead of the



middle class, which they were often leery to even hope or dream that their child might one day reach.

### **VIEWS ON HOME VISITING AND FATHER SUPPORT GROUPS**

We paid the fathers twenty dollars for each interview to express our appreciation for their time. However, by the third interview, we suspect that the rapport our researchers had established with the fathers may have been more of an incentive for them to continue in the study than the stipend. At the fourth and final interview, some of the fathers expressed regret that the study was ending and a few confided that they had talked about things to our researchers that they had never talked to anyone about. For some, the interviews appeared cathartic. Several stated that these discussions provided an opportunity for them to reflect on their childhoods, their relationships, and their children, and made them aware of the value of this process. Jermaine shared his sentiments:

*"With this study, it gets you with yourself. I see myself being more one with myself now. I think I am open ... some of the shit that was on my chest that was built up, like it done came out. I got a free mind, like free thoughts, you feel me? Everything ... it just releases your mind, you feel me? Also, it helps me mellow out ... because there been a couple of times I was mad as hell and you done came and got me and go do this meeting thing and I be like 'Let's go. Let's go. Let's go. I ain't going to jail, buddy.' ... It got me to release some of that anger and hatred I had, you feel me? Just with my father and a lot of shit. ... I think it's just the first time I took the opportunity without letting ... everything that happened just make me mad right then and there. I am usually the person that shuts down. ... I just I had that vibe with you. I had that comfortable vibe, that mentor vibe. I feel like I could tell you anything and I know my word is safe with you ..."*

By the fourth interview, the relationships we had established with the eleven fathers remaining in the study provided a good context for discussing father support programs. We explored their perceptions of fathering programs and their willingness to participate in one. None had ever attended a parenting program for fathers and most were unaware of programs or community organizations focusing on fathering issues.<sup>20</sup> Most were aware of parenting programs and related services for mothers, but generally felt ignored, or left out of these efforts, including the NFN home visiting program. They acknowledged that female NFN home visitors had attempted to include them in the visits, but they generally felt that the program was not for them, even while they expressed appreciation for the services provided to their partners and children. Several of them did admit, however, to reading the materials that home visitors left or consulting with their partners about what was learned at these visits. Harry illustrates:

*"... she [NFN home visitor] does talk to me and ask me how I am doing. She is a nice lady. I am a bit familiar with it. And she really loves my kid. She always brings my daughter freaking toys. ... I check [the pamphlets] out myself. ... Sometimes if I don't want to read it I just ask my wife, 'What's this about?' And she'll tell me and then I am like, 'Oh, maybe I should read it because I will learn something off it, too.' ... Even though she is more here for my wife ... she leaves me stuff, too."*

When asked about their knowledge of fatherhood programs in their communities, most responded similarly to Felix, "Nope...there should be a lot more programs for fathers," he emphasized. Many of our fathers readily admitted that they would have liked some assistance and guidance, particularly in the early stages of parenting.

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<sup>20</sup> A few fathers in the early rounds of interviews mentioned that they had participated in a father program, but we were unable to secure the fourth interview with them and therefore explore their experiences in these programs.

Eric, one of four fathers who had heard of programs for fathers stated:

*"I know guys that would definitely need some help. Like me, being a first-time father, like whatever can help helps. I would take it no problem. I am willing to take it if you are willing to give it. That's it."*

Only one father disagreed. Robert, a 33-year-old father who was proud of his role as his family's sole income provider, did not see the point in a support program that focused on parenting or employment issues.

*"Well, I am kind of stubborn. I don't really need assistance here to take care of my son. ... If they do anything for fathers it shouldn't have anything to do with work. Because then they are not going to get as many fathers as they would probably like to have go to their little class. Because all the fathers that work will be like 'I ain't going to that. I've got a fucking job.'"*

We imagine that there are other working-class fathers like Robert who feel confident in their abilities to parent and work, and who can not imagine how a program could assist them in what often seems like such a natural part of their lives. Robert's voice, however, was alone among the eleven men who completed the four interviews with us. The rest said that they could benefit from a fatherhood program. We explored whether they would prefer a group setting or a one-on-one approach, like home visiting. The fathers were evenly divided on this question. A few suggested that a blend of group meetings and one-on-one visits would be ideal. Harry asserted:

*"I think it should be both. I think you should have someone come to your house, too. But I also think like once in a while, maybe like once a month, they should get a bunch of fathers together and have one big meeting. ..."*

*They could get other insight from other [fathers], too... besides just what this one person [home visitor] is telling you."*

Those preferring group meetings liked the idea of making connections with and learning from other fathers. They suggested that a group setting would also build a stronger sense of community allowing one another to see that they are not alone in their struggles to be effective fathers. Jack shared what he believed would be the benefits of a group.

*"Groups ... you could learn more about them [other fathers] and what they been through and they could learn more about what we been through. We could ... talk about our problems and our situations ..."*

J expanded on the idea of building community.

*"That would be straight, too ... You switch numbers or be like 'Yo, when I need your help or I need to talk to somebody I can call you."*

Some of those preferring one-on-one relationships said that they thought it might be more difficult for the fathers to be open and honest in a group setting. Further, they expressed concerns about finding reliable transportation to attend a support group.

Irrespective of whether they preferred home visitation or a group, they all agreed that the staff member needed to be not only a male, but a father who had personal experience raising children. During the debriefing period of the last interview, several of the fathers indicated that they had surprisingly few people to talk to about life issues and concerns. For several, the interviewer fulfilled that role, albeit temporarily. They wanted empathetic and supportive listeners, with the capacity to understand their lives without judgment. Felix elaborated:

*"They should have a men's program [where] they could vent. ... If they don't have [an individual] to vent [to], they can vent at a program. It doesn't really have to be just how to be a father. It could be anything ...but being able to vent or get words of encouragement. Words of encouragement go a long way. ... What's worth more than that? There is nothing above that. ... Jumpstart to everything. Words of encouragement!"*

When we turned to questions about the preferred content of a father program, their suggestions varied considerably. Some stated that any services delivered to fathers should have a heavy focus on financial management and life skills development. Some felt that job training and placement was essential, and some like Jermaine felt strongly that the program needed to address the issue of jobs and criminal records.

*"I'd like to see a program that can help all fathers getting jobs. ... There are a lot of fathers out here that got criminal records that can't get a good job ... or just can't get a job period."*

Interestingly, a smaller group believed that learning about child development and nurturing parenting skills should be included, and only then, *along with* financial management skills. Ray's response illustrated several of the fathers' suggestions.

*"I think it should be a mixture of a few things – child care and child development should be in there. Job and career, that should be in there. But just basically life skills in general. Money management [and] teaching people ... time management."*

Finally, a few of the fathers also talked about their problems with their wives or partners and stressed the importance of learning better communication skills, relationship coping mechanisms, and

co-parenting strategies. Jack, still reeling from the break-up of a four year relationship with the mother of his two children, was adamant about the importance of keeping families together.

*"I want a program, too, about mothers and fathers and kids together – family. The whole family together ... everyone – the whole family. ... These always have to be a mother program or a father program. It can't ever be a couple ... focused more on the family."*

We believe that our respondents were struggling with a variety of issues that could indeed be addressed by a father program, whether a home visitation program or a parenting support group. Nonetheless, *expectations for participation and outcomes should be modest*. It was difficult to maintain contact with the fathers in our study due to their life circumstances. Moreover, one-on-one relationships were not easy to establish. Many of the fathers who provided their contact information did not follow through with the first interview and many of those who did were clearly uncomfortable when our researchers arrived at their homes. The reality of someone coming to one's home to talk about personal issues can feel threatening, and the level of intimacy that this involves can be uncomfortable, especially, we suspect, for men. Father support groups, as we have seen, raise their own challenges. Erratic work and family schedules, along with transportation problems are impediments to participation. Still, given the nature of the relationships that our interviewers established with many of the fathers, the range of parenting, relationship and employment concerns that were expressed, and the fathers' desires and struggles to be good parents, we believe that father programs would be a good investment.

## CONCLUSION

The life struggles of the fathers in our study are complex, ranging from employment concerns and family financial problems, to navigating violence, to relationship issues, to the dual preoccupation of preparing children to achieve more than they did in school and careers, while at the same time preparing them for hard-living working-class lives. Being a parent may not be easy for anyone in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it is certainly difficult and challenging for men closer to the social and economic margins.

Fathers all recalled feeling excited and happy when they learned about the pregnancies, and many described the births as motivation to stay off the streets, improve their own lives, or to simply “grow up.” Daily realities, however, interfere with these platitudes. Arguments over finances, submitting another denied job application, changing smelly diapers, comforting crying children, diminishing romance, unpaid bills, canceled phone service, broken-down cars, impatient landlords, condescending parole officers, painful family memories, self-doubts and waning self-efficacy, and so much more, emerge as part of the daily grind of life on the margins. It is in this context that marriages and co-habiting relationships survive or dissolve and that parenting gets organized.

The fathers in our study all expressed an interest in their children acquiring an education, and many imagined that they would go to college or, short of that, to the military. They wanted their children to escape the trappings of dead-end jobs and to feel some relief from the daily struggles that occupy them. The worried, though, about their children’s futures. They worried about the influences of the streets or their peers. They worried about drugs and violence in the schools and neighborhoods. They worried about predatory men and early sexual activity among their daughters. They worried that if their children did not learn self-discipline, they would be disciplined by the state, and many, especially racial minority parents, felt that

there was only a small margin for error here. In other words, they were consumed with parental worries that reflected their social locations.

By the end of our study, the glow of romance in their relationships with the mothers of their children often had been dulled by daily problems. They argued mostly about money, but also about housing, parenting, child care, housework, going out with friends, and the like. Some relationships were ending, some with acrimony, while others were entering a different, more mature phase. All seemed to be steeped in extended families, adding support, but also complexity to their lives.

The fathers shared a great deal about their lives with us, and for that we are grateful. But what can we recommend that might bring some modicum of relief to their lives and might create safer, healthier environments for their children? Many of the problems are large scale problems -- systemic in nature -- such as poor job opportunities, housing inadequacies, violent neighborhoods, limited (and often unpaid) educational and job training opportunities, and punitive employer and state policies regarding former prisoners. These are big issues that require big answers, bold leadership, and political will, that are unfortunately beyond the scope and capacity of our study. Our research challenge was to see if we could parlay the insights learned from the fathers in our study into recommendations for parenting support programs that might be useful to the Children's Trust Fund, now a division of the Department of Social Services. Narrowing our focus, we can offer some program recommendations based on the lessons learned from our research, but we do so, with the added caveat that parenting and family issues are nonetheless interrelated to these larger structural issues and can therefore not be entirely separated conceptually or programmatically.



### **PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. The lives of the father in our study are no less complex than the rest of ours, but their complexity is defined by their social locations. As such there are a wide range of issues that they are struggling with, including any combination of income and resource problems, job opportunities, the lack of parental role models, masculine identities and feelings of emasculation, racial and class prejudice, criminal histories, violent dispositions, social exclusion, parental rejection, internalized failure, to identify just some of the angst they shared with us. These fathers expressed gratitude to our researchers for the time and attention given to them, or in other words, for being empathetic listeners, supportive, and nonjudgmental. We believe that fathers might benefit from similar relationships with a trained male home visitor. We are not suggesting, however, that these are easy relationships to establish. Men may fear the intimacy involved in sharing their lives with another man. However, we do feel, based upon our experiences, that attention to this discomfort can help to diminish it, and that with time, trusting relationships can develop. We also believe that the characteristics of the home visitor and his skills at connecting with other men are centrally important. When we convened our research team, we were careful to select young men with working-class backgrounds, who met the criteria of what we called the 3 S's – they needed to be Smart, Sensitive, and to have some Street familiarity. Similar criteria might be included in hiring home visitors.

2. Home visitors are not trained counselors, but their understandings of working-class lives and poverty, and of racial and ethnic dynamics, their language styles, their bi-cultural class experiences and skills may enable them to perform the role of the cultural broker, in which they may help fathers better navigate dominant institutions. In this respect, we recommend that home visitors

become *advocates* for the fathers they work with, particularly in helping them negotiate the courts, child support enforcement, prospective employers, workforce training agencies, banking and financial institutions, state agencies, and mental health organizations.

3. Fathers expressed an interest in learning to create and sustain open communication with their children in efforts to guide and nurture them. At the same time, they emphasized the importance of their role in disciplining children so that they learn to respect their parents, as well as other adults and authority figures, and learn right from wrong. Establishing parental routines that both nurture and discipline children as a means for creating a structure for healthy child development is a tremendous parenting challenge. The fathers in our study are seeking this challenge, but often doing so without positive father figures to model. We recommend that parenting groups with skilled male group facilitators, who are fathers themselves, be established for fathers to voluntarily participate in. Learning nurturing parenting strategies and disciplinary practices, which include alternative strategies to corporal punishment, should be central objectives of the group. Fathers expressed a strong interest in learning from other fathers.

4. As much of the report detailed, fathers with extensive exposure to institutional and interpersonal violence are struggling to integrate normative expectations of parenting with preparing their children for violent social worlds. This is a difficult program challenge. How do we change parenting styles without changing the social environments from which child-rearing strategies are derived? After all, teaching children violence was often viewed as a means of reducing violence in their children's lives and as a form of self-protection, which are both valued parenting objectives. We recommend that a group facilitator work with a martial arts

instructor in addressing the issues of violence, self-discipline, and self-protection in a father's group. In addition to the value of teaching a philosophy of self-defense in these contexts, we also believe that in order to navigate violent social spaces, children may indeed need to learn the codes that govern street violence, and any effective program strategy will need to corroborate these parental concerns. Of course, ultimately, the goal should be to teach people skills that would promote community organization and empowerment to democratically address resource inadequacies in their families and communities. The latter may or may not be outside the scope of a parenting program, and, would, at the very least, need to be supported by outside groups engaged in similar efforts.

5. Finally, many of the fathers in our study shared with us problems they were having in their relationships with the mothers of their children. Resource issues were often at the root of these problems, but concerns about intimacy, trust, power, control, volatility, and infidelities also were mentioned. With a divorce rate hovering around 50 percent in the U.S. and a burgeoning marital and couples counseling industry, it is clear that the poor and working class are not the only ones struggling with intimate relationships. Many of the fathers in our study, however, also harbored the burdens of coming from families in which domestic abuse, family instability and disruption had occurred. On this issue, we could not agree more with the observation made by Ray, the father who pointed out that low income couples can rarely afford counseling, like couples from the wealthier classes, and usually do not get professional assistance until they are mandated by the courts. Program collaborations with couple's counselors would be recommended, especially if lower rates could be negotiated and/or state subsidized, so that relationship issues could be voluntarily addressed before they reach a point of no return.