

Nurturing Families Network Father Involvement Study

18-Month Interim Report



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Nurturing Families Network Father Involvement Study: 18-Month Interim Report

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This report represents the second and final interim report to be issued on the father involvement study. Our six-month report, released last year in December, provided a focused review of the low-income fatherhood literature, a description of our study, and a description of services that the Nurturing Families Network (NFN) program is currently providing to families.¹ 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 were successful in securing 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 2009.² Researchers met with each of the 35 participants and explained the study and answered questions before acquiring consent from the fathers to participate. We expect to interview each father as many as four times over a period of a year. A final report will be completed at the end of this calendar year, 2010.

Our 18-month report provides a range of preliminary observations of 35 fathers participating in the study. The sample represents a diverse group of men, who have children participating in the NFN program. Our respondents are from 13 program sites throughout the state and live in 16 different cities and towns in Connecticut. Similarly, the ages of fathers in our sample range from 18 to 49 years, with a median age of 25 years. The

¹ 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.

² In addition, we also discontinued our plan to observe NFN father programs and to conduct an ethnographic study of fathers.

population is racially and ethnically diverse, with 40% Latino, 26% white, 17% black, 14% bi- or multi-racial, and one Asian Indian father.

Experiences also vary considerably in terms of family make-up (especially whether biological parents were present) as well as educational achievements, arrest and incarceration histories, employment histories, and prior experiences as fathers. In short, we believe that our sample of 35 fathers reflects a rich array of life worlds and experiences from which to draw important lessons.

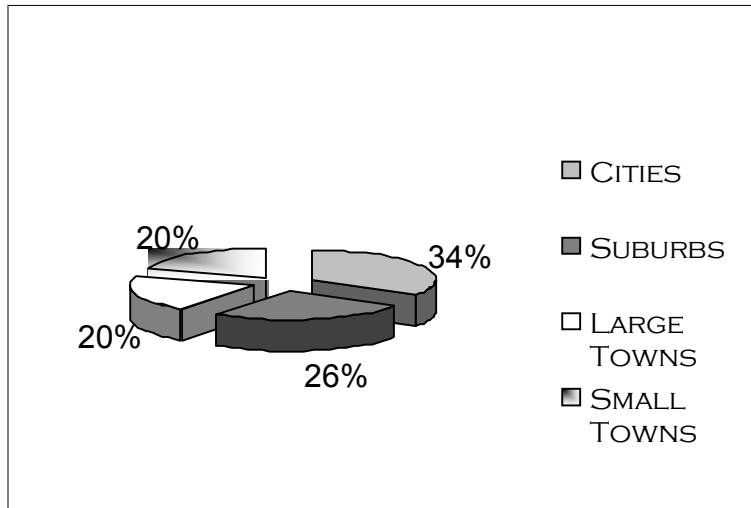
In this report, we provide social and demographic characteristics of our sample and report on information acquired from our first interview with the fathers. More specifically, we focus on the fathers' characterizations of their families of origin, particularly their relationships with their biological fathers and mothers, stepfathers, and other male role models. We then examine the fathers' perceptions of parenting, attempting to draw connections between these and their family backgrounds whenever possible. Finally, we address three key issues that emerged in our analysis of the interviews: coping mechanisms and articulated needs among fathers with little to no prior positive models for fathering; the emotional travails of not meeting the role of family provider; and how a smaller subset of fathers who have children with previous partners negotiate being both present fathers to children in their current relationships and often absent fathers to children in earlier relationships.

Social and Demographic Profiles

As mentioned above, the 35 fathers represent a varied group along several dimensions. Living in sixteen 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).³

Figure 1: Where Fathers Reside in Connecticut

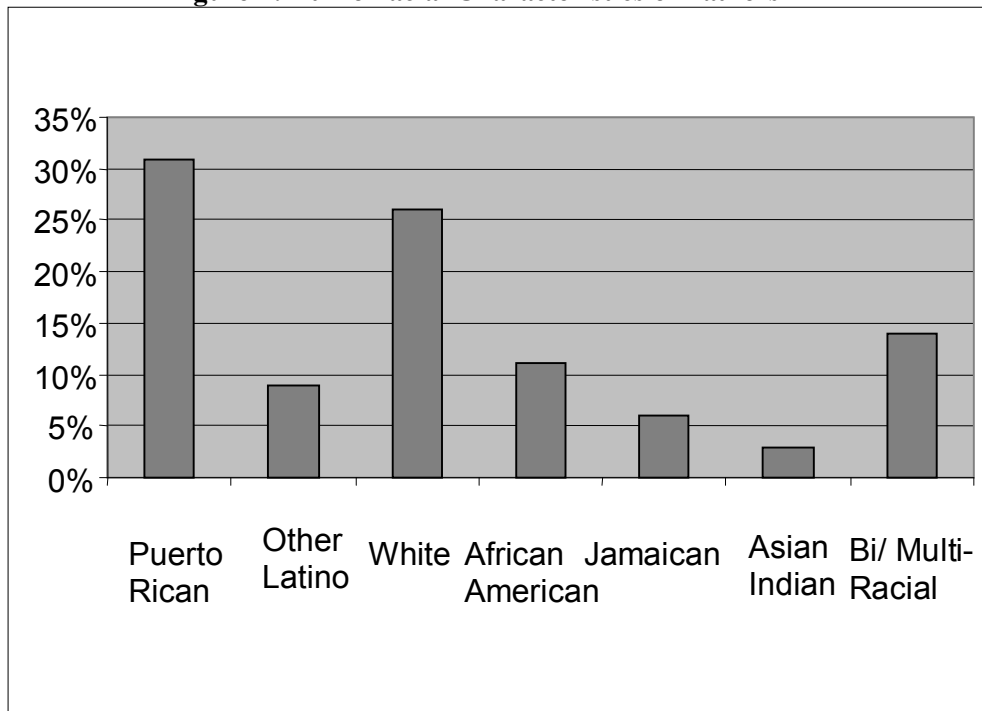


As shown in Figure 2, 31% of fathers are Puerto Rican, while 9% belong to other Latino groups, 26% are white, 11% African American, 6% Jamaican, 3% Asian Indian., and 14% are identified as bi- or multi-racial.⁴

³ 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.

⁴ 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 the fathers was 25 *at the time of the 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 (see table 1 below). The reason for this discrepancy is that, as illustrated in Figure 3, 40% of the fathers had prior children. As we will see later in our analysis, 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. 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.

Table 1: Father's Median Age

At Interview	25
At Birth of First Child	20

Figure 3: Fathers with Previous Children

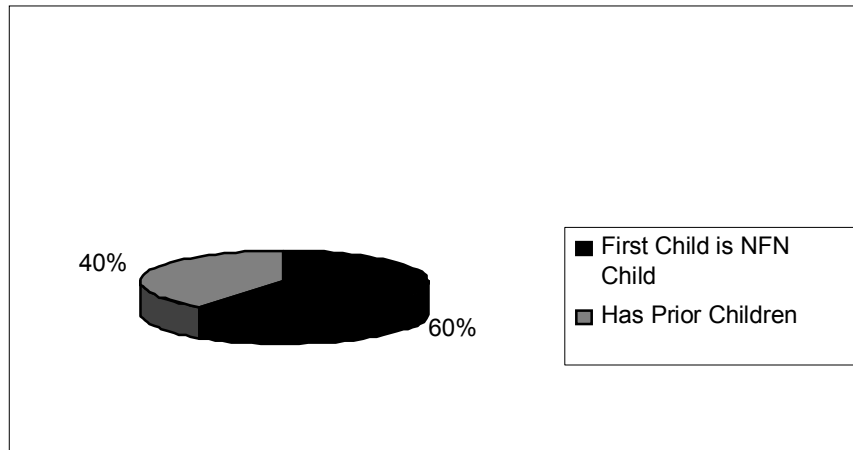


Figure 4: Fathers Living with NFN Target Child

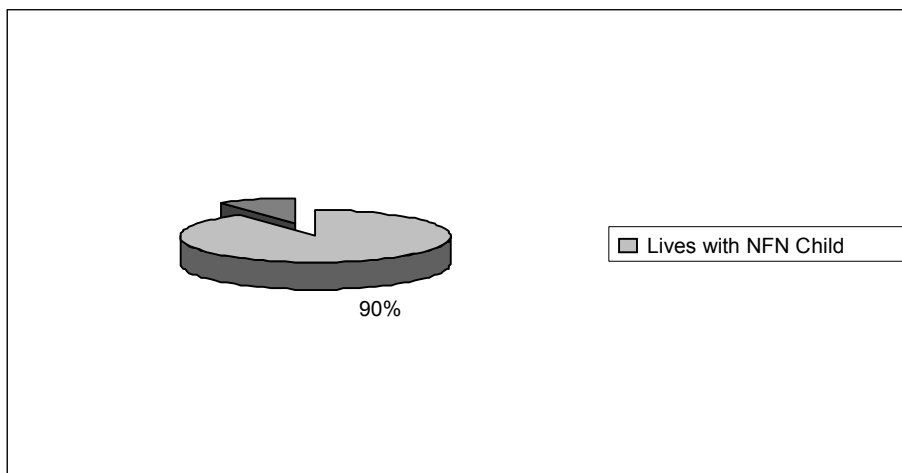
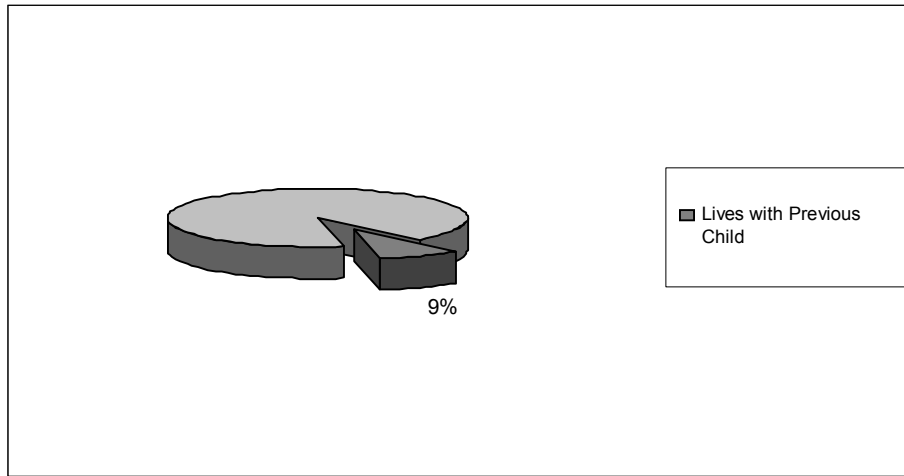
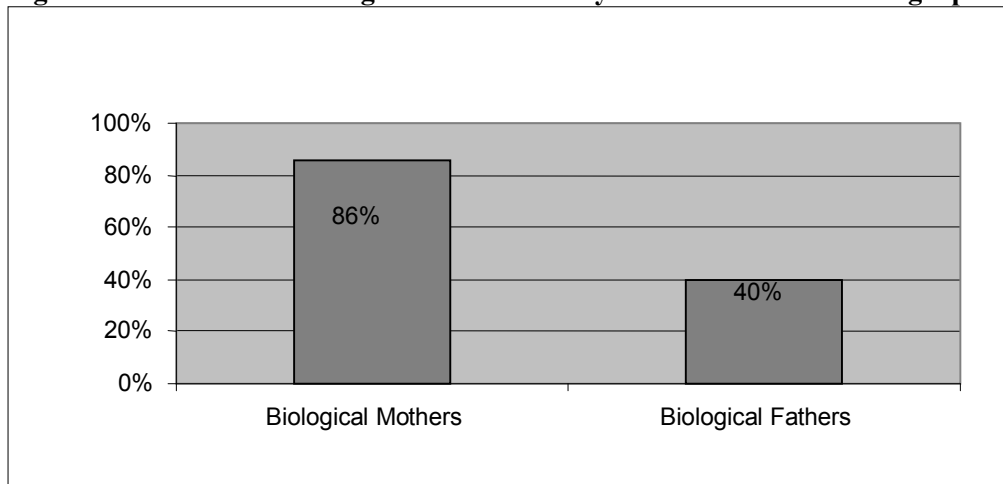


Figure 5: Fathers Living with Previous Children



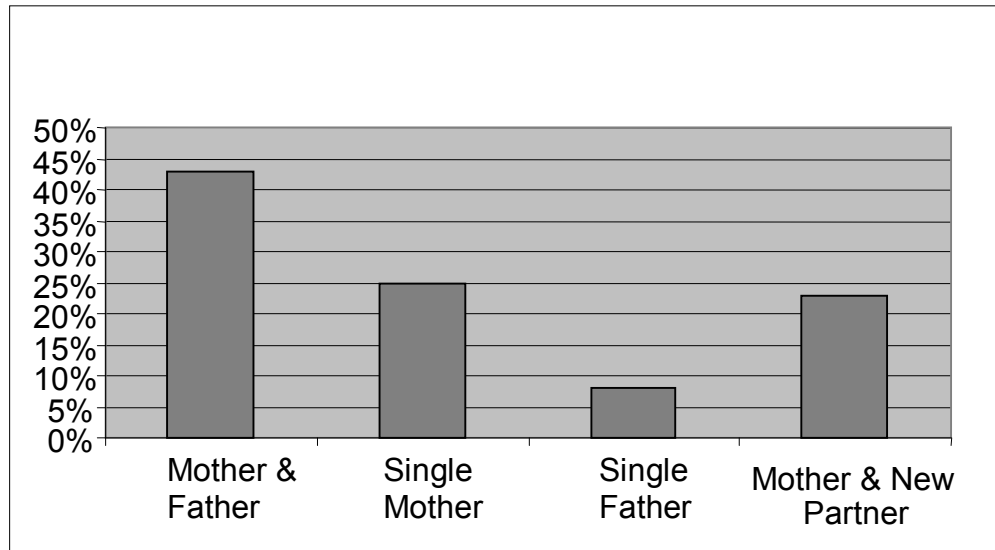
Examining the family background of fathers, we found that biological mothers were always present in 86% of their lives while they were growing up, while biological fathers were always present in only 40% of cases (see figure 6 below).

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.

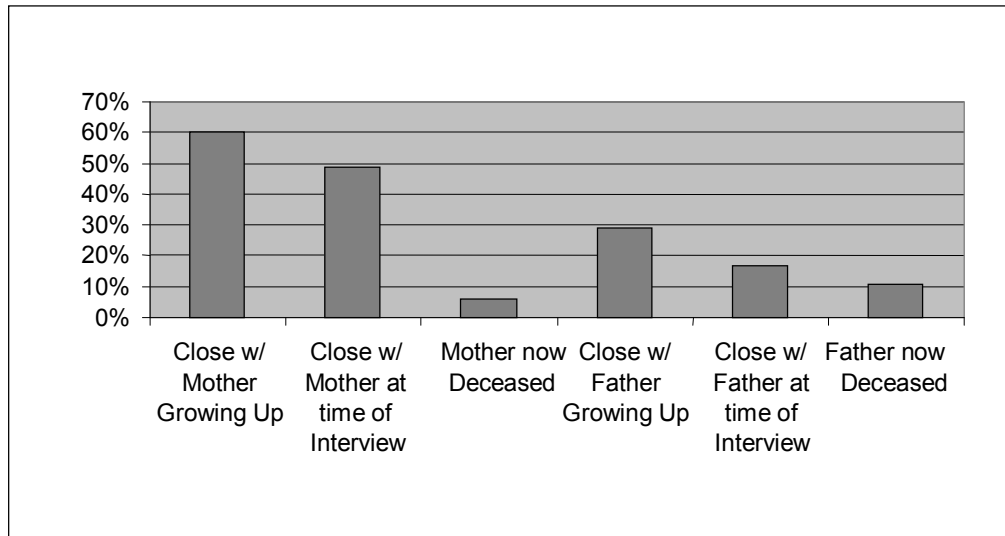
Figure 7: Type of Household Fathers were Primary Raised In



Only 29% of the fathers' biological parents were cohabitating 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 currently had close relationships with 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). We also know that 29% of respondents were significantly exposed to a cohabitating partner in the home, even though only one described their stepfather as their real father or father figure.⁵

⁵ These data could be underreported, since we were unable to get satisfactory documentation of this information for 10 fathers, or 29% of the sample.

Figure 8: Percent with Close Relationships with Biological Parents



The variation in social-demographic characteristics, family backgrounds, and exposure to biological and stepfathers provides a rich sample of fathers from which to explore parenting issues. In the next section, we supplement our quantitative data on fathers' family backgrounds and experiences with information we learned in the course of our interviews.⁶

FATHERS' FAMILY BACKGROUNDS AND EXPERIENCES

As described above, fathers in our study were raised in varying family formations. A little less than one-half were mostly raised by both biological parents and most of these parents were married and lived together. One-third of fathers was primarily raised by one biological parent – usually the mother, but in two cases the father. These single mothers may have had boyfriends from time to time, but these men did not spend enough time in the home to become a primary caregiver. About one-fifth of respondents were raised by a biological parent (the mother in all cases but one) and a new partner. In these cases, the mother either legally remarried or had a

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

live-in-boyfriend whom many of the respondents referred to as their “stepfather.”

In the remainder of this section, we report on how respondents described their experiences in these different family formations, with a particular focus on their relationships with parents and step-parents.

Traditional Two-Parent Families

In the more traditional two-parent working-class families, both parents were wage earners. In a few instances, mothers supplemented the family income through part-time work, but most worked full time. The only cases in which respondents’ mothers did not work were among families from rural areas outside of the continental United States. In these cases, mothers strictly worked in the home, often along side other female family members who lived in the same residence.

Even though mothers were often working, the organization of these households still tended to follow more traditional gender divisions of labor. Many respondents noted that their fathers would do dishes, cook and clean occasionally; still, childcare and household chores were primarily the mothers’ responsibility, while their fathers took responsibility for the yard work and “handy-man” duties. One father acknowledged this, while humorously alluding to his father’s resistance to these responsibilities, “My father was responsible for the outside of the house. The grass was usually three feet tall before he’d mow, but that was his responsibility.”

Similarly, our study participants tended to describe their mothers as the nurturing, caring parent whom they could confide in to address more intimate issues. Meanwhile, fathers were primarily viewed as providers

and “disciplinarians.” It was the father’s duty to be not only the primary breadwinner - every father in these two parent homes was employed - but to also instill a sense of discipline in their children. Further, many of these fathers, who worked blue collar jobs, would teach their sons a trade skill, such as mechanic or electrician skills, and occasionally provided their sons with their first jobs, either by working with them or helping them to get jobs through their fathers’ social networks.

In disciplinary matters, fathers often practiced corporal punishment and were usually respected as the head of the household, the final adjudicator of big family issues. About one-half of these fathers were reported to be occasionally active with their children, getting them involved in sports and taking their sons on fishing trips (fishing was the most reported activity between all fathers and sons). But their emotional involvement appeared to be minimal. Most respondents described their fathers as “hard working” and as “a role model.” A father was someone to look up to, and this remained true even in many cases when the father was emotionally uninvolved or physically abusive toward his spouse and/or children.

Jack, a 23 year old father of two, recounts his nuanced relationship with his father:

“Even though the abuse he’s still a good father. He’s my father, come on now ... I ain’t going to deny him ... he used to work as a mechanic. He was maintenance at [the] hospital. He worked ... wow, he did so much shit ... he likes working with his hands. ... I didn’t know how to work on the car and he was just ‘Come on, you coming to work with me. I am going to show you how to work on the car.’ And then one time I got the hang of it he was like ‘You know I got a job for you.’ [Later Jack noted], he invites me to go fishing, just me and him, father and son ...”

In short, fathers in these more traditional two-family homes were portrayed along two dimensions: they worked and supported the family and they kept children in line. With only a few exceptions, the role of the father in the two-parent home seemed to emphasize being a teacher, disciplinarian, and role model.

While fathers tended to rule with an “iron fist”, the mothers were often our respondents’ confidants. In many cases, mothers served as a counterbalance to their fathers’ aggressive behaviors. Many mothers were “close” to their children, often soothing their emotional, psychological and sometimes physical pain born from relationships with their fathers. Respondents were more likely to talk about their daily lives with their mothers, and even confess mistakes or abject behavior they were too afraid to share with their fathers. While most mothers worked full time jobs, they were still considered the primary caretakers who tended to call on fathers only when their forms of discipline were not producing desired results. Mothers helped with homework, regularly prepared meals, and in only a few cases were emotionally distant or intemperate.

Joseph, a 25 year old father describes the relational borders he navigated between a nurturing mother and more punitive father:

“My mom ... [I have] the confidence to tell her anything ... she’ll talk to us. She wouldn’t let my father know. If my father knew then it was a wrap ... [She is] [k]ind, loving, understanding. She is like everything ... guidance counselor. She will tell you like ‘Well, don’t do it again. Try to do it this way next time.’ Or just let you make your mistakes and then correct you and then if you made it again then you already know what to do all over again ... that’s how we were raised. You learn from your mistakes.”

In short, relationship dynamics between parents and children were described in ways that largely reflected traditional working-class families with both biological parents present.

Single Parent Homes

The duration of single parenting varied considerably in our respondents' families. Some of their mothers were single for a short period of time, after which they partnered with boyfriends to create a home, and on several occasions remarried. Other single mothers stayed single most or all of their lives and raised their children primarily by themselves, although often with the assistance of family members - in fact, in many of these families, grandfathers and uncles served as key father figures. Most of these single parent families were the result of divorce, while a few were the result of romantic relationships that never resulted in sustained cohabitation. Physical spousal abuse was often a factor in divorce, as was alcohol abuse and other unsavory behaviors. In the following we separate our discussion of our respondents' experiences with single parenting, based upon whether a live-in partner was present in their lives or whether their mothers remained single.

Biological Mother with Live-in Boyfriends or Spouses

It may seem odd to characterize fathers' families of origin as single, if a live-in boyfriend or spouse was present during their upbringing. We could just as easily have placed them under the category of two family homes, with only one biological parent present. Instead, we chose to emphasize single parenthood in these family formations because of the ways in which our participants talked about these households, and particularly step-parents. While many used the language of step-parent, we were surprised by how many minimized the involvement of stepfathers in their lives. Very few "stepfathers" were actually described as father figures by respondents.

Even in cases where respondents had distant or no relationship with their biological fathers, they were still likely to see them as irreplaceable.

Steven, a 20 year old man, illustrates. He bitterly says that his biological father "... never took the initiative to learn how to be a father..." but he nonetheless refused to allow his stepfather to occupy this status.

"[My stepfather] always tried [to be a father figure]. He's really tried. But I always had a barrier of, 'Hey, I have a piece of shit father, don't try to replace him.' Like don't try to be that guy [laughter]. I am good with knowing I have a piece of shit father. Don't try to come in and play the 'Oh, I've been a father before so let me try again now.'... I wasn't having it. I was okay with the fact that ... I had a shitty father that wasn't there than some guy trying to take his place. Like I feel that's kind of disrespectful. ... Even though how much of a piece of shit he was I feel it's disrespectful for some man to try to take another man's place. So I was just like 'Screw you!' Every time he tried helping me with something [laughs]. ...He tried so hard. He tried taking me fishing."

Only one respondent of the eight who grew up with a stepfather in the home considered him to be a significant father figure in his life. In this particular case, the stepfather entered the respondent's life when he was four. Most new unions occurred when fathers were older and more resistant to a "father replacement." Often times, stepfathers, no matter how genuine or sincere in their efforts, were shunned by respondents. On several occasions, however, respondents felt justified in their rejections, stating that stepfathers were not employed or failed to assist mothers carry out household duties. Very rarely did stepfathers teach respondents trade skills, and attempts at discipline were often met with severe criticism that stepfathers were overstepping their bounds, and were unjust in their judgments and behaviors. These reactions revealed an interesting paradox

among many fathers in our study. Many later told us that in the absence of a biological father, it is important for a young man to have a “male role model” in his life, while they themselves tended to reject efforts made by stepfathers, albeit, in some cases, for good reasons.

Danny, a 23 year old father with a two-month old child illustrates this paradox. Danny grew up without knowing his father at all, his mother remarried and his stepfather has always supported his family. And although Danny admits that children need a “father figure” and that his stepfather was a very supportive force in his family, he is still unable to accept him as a father figure.

“I really didn’t think of nobody as a father figure. (Not even your mom’s boyfriend?) I never looked at no one like that. ... I mean he’s a good dude. We do things together, too. But I don’t see that father figure. I could never see nobody as that. I really just can’t ... I know she [respondent’s mother] looks at him as a father figure because he’s been there for us through a lot of things, you know? He’s been real good to my sister. He’s a good dude. Without him, we wouldn’t be in here [in their current residence] right now.”

Highlighting the paradox once again, Danny later states the importance of having a “father figure”:

“Discipline, you know, that structure. You know what I am saying? You got that father figure there or something you going to be scared to go home [chuckles]. I don’t know because I never had that. So I don’t know.”

In sum, most of our respondents who grew up with stepfathers kept them at a distance and often considered their biological fathers, however neglectful, as irreplaceable. Absence often provided a space for anger and

resentment that could not be healed through relationships with even the best-intentioned stepfathers.

Single Mother Homes

Even though we did have three study participants who were raised primarily by single fathers, we focus our attention here on single mothers, since these households were much more common (26%). We should also point out that even though respondents were primarily raised in “single mother homes,” several of them still had extensive contact with their biological fathers. Some respondents grew up in the same neighborhood as their fathers and saw them frequently. While compliance with child-support responsibilities varied among these non-custodial fathers, many respondents reported that their fathers occasionally took them fishing, hunting, to the beach, and on other activities. Further, our participants were much more likely to refer to involved non-custodial fathers as friends, as confidants, or as an adult they could relate to compared to respondents with custodial biological fathers, who were more likely to see their fathers as disciplinarians who attempted to impose structure in their households.

Nate, a 27 year old father of two children, describes his relationship with his father. Nate spent the early part of his life without his father. When granted the opportunity to have regular contact with him, Nate appreciated his relationship.

“ ... you get into a fight with somebody you don't want to run home and go get your mother. You want your father there. ... It was good when he was around. ... He took me fishing and hunting. He taught me how to cook ... he showed me a lot of things ... things that fathers would normally teach their sons and stuff like that. ... He was trying to make up for lost time ... he wasn't really too strict on me.

...He would talk to me about things. ...He reasoned ... like man to man ... even though I was still young but he treated me like I was a man."

Clearly, several non-custodial fathers worked at developing good relationships with our respondents; many, however, did not. Twenty-three percent of fathers were reported as never involved in our respondents' lives, while another 29% were only involved in their early years. We describe fathers who left their families completely as well as fathers who have only sporadically seen their children - usually a handful of times throughout the respondent's lifetime - as absent fathers. A few of these fathers were once married to the mother of the respondent, but relinquished their paternal role after the separation with the mother. Many of these fathers are described by our study participants as "losers", "abusive", as involved in the drug trade - as either an addict or a dealer - or as very involved in the street culture of hustling and constantly being on the move.

To several of our respondents, the absence of their fathers is deeply felt and described as an unpardonable. They are angry and critical, and desperately seek to understand why they were abandoned, while they imagine how their lives would have been different if their fathers had remained. Several commented that when these fathers did make a rare appearance, they would bring gifts to show their love, or to prove their willingness to provide for their families. Many respondents grew tired of this gesture and felt as though their fathers were trying to buy their love and replace their daily responsibilities with impromptu gifts.

Jay, a 20-year-old father, who has had very limited contact with his biological father, illustrates:

“My dad was never there. My dad was always locked up. He lived in New York. He was never in my life. ... I met him a couple times. ... Back then he’ll try to buy us everything to make us love him. Just showing off, you know what I am saying?”

Absent fathers remain the bane of some of our respondents’ existences, which - as we will see later - become paramount in shaping their own desires, motivations and practices as fathers.

Relationships with Mothers

As we noted above, our study participants tended to describe their relationships with their mothers as close (60%). In cases where biological parents lived separately, mothers often performed a gate-keeping role. Mothers tended to refuse the father access to his children when she felt the father’s lifestyle was not good for the child(ren), or in cases where the mother felt physically at risk or worried about her children’s physical safety with the father. There were a few instances in which access was denied because the mother was angry that the father had started a new relationship. But mothers tended to exercise their gatekeeping role most often when physical spousal abuse or drug and/or alcohol abuse were involved.

Many men raised primarily by their mothers described their mothers as performing the traditional roles of both mothers and fathers, with several saying that their mothers were both “their mom and their dad.” Mothers attended sporting events, played catch with their sons, and financially supported the family. As they grew older, several respondents recognized the burdens that this created for their mothers, who had to find ways to be both nurturers and disciplinarians (among other challenges), and they acknowledged that this had deepened their respect for their mothers. In the eyes of their sons, these mothers became virtual ‘superwomen,’ juggling

various identities and roles, some of which were traditionally associated with fathers.

Similarly, when our respondents were involved in illegal activities, they tended to absolve their mothers of any responsibility, arguing that she had done all she could, but that without the support of a father it was difficult to maintain disciplinary standards. Some of them said explicitly that they needed the disciplinary structure provided by a father figure in the home. In some cases, exasperated mothers abandoned more nurturing postures and tried to adopt tough disciplinary practices, but often to no avail. Kane, a 31 year-old father of two children has spent time in prison for selling drugs. He describes his mother's efforts to steer him away from delinquent activities.

"She always try her best to keep me out of trouble and tell me what's the right thing to do. Especially with growing up without a father, you know, she tried to be both – a mother and a father ... she tries to teach me things that a father would teach you. ... I think she did her best. I was hard-headed, you know what I mean? [laughter] She's a good lady, though ... she didn't like that, the idea of me getting into trouble constantly ... But what could she do, basically? I mean really ... nothing [laughs] ... There is nothing really she could have done."

Of course, we don't know that a father in the home could have averted delinquent activities either. Adolescents tend to rebel against their parents in efforts to establish their own identities. Our respondents did, however, seem to indicate that overworked and stressed mothers were often little match for their resistance to authority.

Abusive Relationships

Almost one-half of our respondents reported incidents of domestic violence and abuse in their homes while growing up. Most incidents involved biological fathers abusing mothers, some involved a stepfather or live-in boyfriend, and in other cases, the abuse was directed toward our respondents and their siblings. Physical abuse of children was often an extension of physical discipline. Mothers were also the perpetrators of abuse, although less often than fathers, and in only one case was the mother described as physically abusive toward her spouse.⁷

Physical Spousal/ Partner Abuse

Most of the incidences of domestic violence directed toward the mothers eventually resulted in divorce or separation, and in most of these cases drug and/or alcohol abuse were involved. Respondents often expressed ambivalence about their abusive fathers, trying hard to condemn the action without condemning the man. Some abusive fathers spent time with their kids and financially supported the family, enhancing their ambivalence toward him.

Javi, a 19-year-old father of an eleven month old child, describes his feelings toward his father, who, after leaving the family, became heavily involved with drugs. Here, Javi recalls a memory of his father abusing his mother, and although he admits he found his father's actions horrible, he cannot totally stop caring about his father entirely:

"Mainly it was abuse, physical abuse. ... Every time my father would come home from like probably work my mother wouldn't have food ready or anything like that.

⁷ We do not include corporal punishment here as a form of physical abuse, but rather more serious incidents that involved hitting with objects, kicking, slapping in the face, or striking any part of the body with fists.

... And also my father used to use drugs, man. ... I mean I suffer from it, but now that I am older it's kind of like you let go of that. ... The worst one was when ... my mother was pregnant, my father ... 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 had me a lot of flashbacks about him ... that really got me to the point where I was like I don't really want to know anything about my father ... [but] since he used to use drugs I probably worry that he would be shot or killed or something. Because he was one of those crazy people to get involved in things like that. And to hear something like that would be like real shocking for me."

Respondents were much less forgiving when a stepfather or live-in boyfriend was the perpetrator of abuse toward their mothers. Many of our respondents indicated they were already disposed to question, ignore, or refuse efforts by stepfathers to exercise a parental, or masculine, role in the home. In abusive situations, several respondents assumed the role of family protector, usurping the stepfather or live-in boyfriend as "the man of the house." These incidents would result in verbal and sometimes physical fights, and in some cases forced the mother to choose between her boyfriend and her child, in which case the child won unilaterally.

Todd is a 29-year-old man with a two-week-old daughter. Although he was raised by his mother, he often had contact with his biological father, but nevertheless considered himself the protector of his home. Todd is large in stature. His bear-like presence exudes confidence in his physical capacities, while still exhibiting a gentle presence. He describes his role of protecting his family borders.

"I beat up two of my mother's boyfriends. ... One of them ... came in the house drunk. ... So he goes and starts yelling at my mother ... and I hear my mother say,

'Don't put your hands on me.' So I get up. And I walk through the door ... and I just hit him ... bam. ... He charged me ... when he charged me I was just backing up ... bam, bam, just tagging him. ... Knocked him out ... because like I had to be the man of the house ... my father took care of me but he didn't live with us. I had to be the man of the house. Even though my mother was playing the mother and the father role, I still had to be the man of the house. I had to take care of everything even though I was in school.'

Child Abuse

As stated above, most incidents in which a respondent was the victim of physical abuse involved fathers, but mothers were also perpetrators at times. In most cases, the abuse was described as stemming from discipline that got out of control, where parents lost their tempers and punishments became severe. Respondents seemed much more likely to dismiss these incidents and forgive their parents when the parents were involved in their lives in caring ways. But when abuse was coupled with mothers who were not nurturing or fathers who were generally absent, the abuse validated the respondent's belief that the parent did not care about or love them.

James is a man in his forties and the sting of his mother's physical and verbal abuse, and her parental neglect still deeply disturbs him. He recounts having to pick her up from bars and claims that she is a mother only by title.

"[She was] a real violent drunk. ... I guess she just didn't care any more. I don't know. She didn't really give a shit. ... I would say [she was violent] all the time. Yeah, it was [random], just a violent drunk. ... When we grew up 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 lay on your back and have me in the

first place? It's not my fault I was born.' I didn't ask to come in this world. ...Our mother used to fuckin' hit us with shit ... being violent ... a belt, bat ... a stick, a switch, anything. Anything you could [get] your hands on..."

Sammy, on the other hand, interprets his father's abuse as extreme discipline, but because his father was a provider, abstained from alcohol, and was a hard worker, Sammy minimizes the abuse by saying that he instilled character into his children by insisting that they be hard workers.

"... my father's way of punishing us ... was like a lashing to an animal. He would get us with whatever he had in his hand. ... To go against my father's word wasn't happening; his word was of a king. ... My father used to get mad at so many things. ... One time ... we were working and ... we had left behind a roll of beans and then my father got mad, really bad, and he punished one of my brothers, and he hit him really hard."

Thinking that his father was gone, Sammy tried to comfort his brother by criticizing his father's behavior. Sammy continues, "And he was listening to me. He grabbed me and hit me so hard that it was about 15 days later and I still couldn't sleep on my back." Later, Sammy attempts to minimize his father's abuse and instead characterize him as a good father:

"I consider him, in some part ... a good father because, apart from the abuse ... we never lack[ed] ... food or clothes. ... We never saw him with a cigar in mouth or a drink in his hands ... he always taught us that ... none of [my] 12 brothers have any vices or nothing. These are things that ... are a reflection of my father. ... We always complain ... that he deprived us from going to school ... [or wish] he wouldn't have been so rude in the way that he punished us. ... He couldn't see us playing because he would say that we were being lazy and that we needed to work. And then he would give us work to do whatever work we could do. In that sense

we always complain but on the other hand I appreciate it."

Many of the fathers in our study were exposed to violence and have struggled to understand the intentions behind the violence that they witnessed. Making sense of the abuse is, of course, important in forming their perspectives on fathering.

PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES OF FATHERING

In this section, we explore the fathers' perspectives on fathering - their expectations, practices, challenges, hopes, and fears. We present this information immediately following the section on their family backgrounds in order to provide a context for better understanding their perspectives and practices.

Father as Provider

Respondents articulated two primary father roles that they strived to meet: to be an economic provider, irrespective of whether they were currently employed, and to provide a safe environment so that children could learn the skills and norms needed to "be successful" in society. While there was some variation, nearly every father expressed concern about their children's futures as well as the expectation that their children would do better than they had in school and in the workplace. These hopes and expectations provide the basis for their own sacrifices, their desires to be role models, and their reasons for providing a disciplined structure in the household.

With only a few exceptions, our fathers asserted that their primary responsibility was to provide financial security for their children. In fact, the breadwinner expectation rolled off their tongues regardless of their educational achievements, work histories, incarceration histories, current

work opportunities, or whether they were currently living with the mother of their child(ren). Their identity as provider is challenged by the reality of scarce resources and opportunities, an issue we discuss in more length later. Some of our respondents were unemployed; others reported working several part-time and off-the-books jobs for little compensation, while others were working more than one job. Some in the latter category expressed concerns about the toll that long work hours were having or were likely to have on their relationships with their children. Several of the fathers were trying to break from the street economy, but a lack of job opportunities combined with the expectation of being a provider were challenging their efforts. A few fathers insisted, however, that drug dealing and fathering do not mix well.

Kane, a former drug dealer, and father of two children -- an 8 year old daughter and a 5 month old son -- considered himself a good provider while he was supporting his first child with drug money. After being incarcerated for 5 ½ years, he has stopped selling drugs and is currently working two jobs. He reflects on the consequences that these different income sources and activities have had on his relationships with his children.

"It's a little harder now ... no, it's not harder ... it's actually better because I get to spend more time with him. When I was in "the game" I was like constantly out in the street doing what I wanted to do and not spending any quality time with my daughter. I was only coming around [to] give up money. It was easy to just hit you up with a little cash and then slide back off. But I didn't want to spend any time with her. But now it's better because I can just spend time with them ... just sitting with him, playing with him, feeding him..."

Most fathers seemed to agree with Kane, that the streets and fathering do not mix well, as they searched for jobs to meet the expectation of being a family provider.

Father as Caretaker

In general, fathers were uncertain and often conflicted about disciplinary issues. Many articulated the importance of being more emotionally available to their children and bonding with their children through open and honest communication, but most are still convinced that corporal punishment is sometimes necessary. Some expressed total opposition to any form of physical punishment, and most agreed that grounding children, lecturing them, and discussing their behavior were preferable methods of discipline, but most nevertheless viewed corporal punishment as a last resort.

Easton, a 32-year-old immigrant and father of a one-month old son, recalls his father slapping him only once, but says that his discipline will be whatever is the most appropriate for his son in any given situation:

"...like I said my father never spanked us. So I don't think I am going to spank my kid. I am going to say that now because he is little [laughter]. I may have to tear his ass up. But for right now I am going to say I don't know. That's what it is. You got to build that good relationship from early to get that, so the disrespect won't come on ... you got to teach a kid not to lie from early."

Interestingly, many fathers who were previously street involved suggested that these experiences might become strengths in raising their children. Several said they intended to be open with their children by sharing their life stories and experiences with them and making them aware of mistakes

they had made in an effort to teach the child “right from wrong.”

Transparency, according to James, the father of a nine-month old son, could have better results than corporal punishment. James elaborates:

“...you sit down and talk to your kid. You ain’t got to put your hand on a kid. It takes a real ... I don’t know ... I can’t really think of the word to say ... but I’d rather sit down with my child and have my child know that I love him, I care about him enough where he can come to me for any reason or anything.”

Similarly, Nate is adamant about being honest with his sons about his criminal past as a way of establishing honest communication.

“Being that I had that experience [selling drugs and serving prison time] and everything now I can advance my talks with him. I am not going to hide nothing from him. ... I am going to let him know everything ... that’s not the route to go. Trust me, I know that ... I been there. You can walk in my shoes if you want to. Don’t do it. ... It’s nothing to hide from him. If he want to know anything about [anything] I will let him know everything about it. ... It’s always good to be open and honest. ... ‘Tell me any and everything. You done killed somebody? Come tell me. ... I don’t know if I am going to turn you in or not [laughter] but come tell me. If you like boys, come tell me. I might not agree with it, but I am going to love you. I am going to have to accept that. I mean I am not going to turn my back on you. It might hurt me, but whatever.”

Their desires for open, honest communication appear to deviate from the parental models provided by most of their fathers. Similarly, several fathers indicated that they were also assuming responsibilities that fell within the purview of the traditional mother, like changing diapers and staying awake late at nights or getting up at night to take care of newborns. They also emphasized the importance of learning to listen to their children,

again suggesting that this would lead to an alternative to traditional forms of discipline. Donte, a 23-year-old father of a 3 month old son, explains:

“... discipline ... there got to be some type of stability and you got to be more understanding, more open-minded about certain situations. You just can't be closed minded ... I just think you have to be there for them mentally, financially, and you just got to discipline your children. Not 'Oh, I am going to beat your face off' ... not nothing like that. ... That's the problem is that a lot of fathers ... or parents, period ... like they don't listen. Since that's your child they got to listen to you. And a lot of people don't listen to their children. That's when they get it messed up. You have to listen. There are two sides to every story. You've got to listen.”

As fathers described their intentions of being a confidant, friend and disciplinarian to their male and female children, they often expressed their views about gender and related parental roles. For instance, while fathers often said that both parents need to be intimately involved in disciplining their children, many fathers lean toward the notion that it takes a man to truly provide the structure and “fear” needed to create a “stable” home. Invoking gender differences, some of the fathers noted that, at times, all that is needed to discipline a child is the “male’s deep voice.” Even with fathers’ interests in being more in tune with their children’s emotions, they still view a mother as having a more gentle, nurturing nature and a father as having a more distant, strong, and controlled demeanor, and believe that children respond to these differences.

Jermaine is a 20-year-old non-biological father of a one-year-old daughter. He assumed the role of father of his girlfriend’s child and has been with her since the pregnancy.

"... a father can do more than a mother can. I learned that from my uncle. Because it's like ... kids, they like ... they'll listen but they need like that male bass ... that male voice ... the strongness from the male in their life. It's like, my little cousin, my aunt could say all day 'Sit down. Sit down. Sit down. Sit down. Stop running around.' Until my uncle, [in a low strong voice] 'Sit down and stop playing!' That's when they actually don't move. That male voice is the Enforcer. But the female voice is there, though. That's your momma. That's the female voice. But the male voice is the Enforcer. It gets mostly everything done."

Several fathers also indicated that they intended to be a good father by being a good role model, articulated as being aware of how they carry themselves in the presence of their children. Many fathers said that they were much less aggressive and more mindful not to raise their voices around their children. They wished to project an image of an ideal man, for boys to model, and for girls to understand how they should be treated by men. Of course, these models reflect the heterosexual, masculine worlds that the fathers inhabit. While they are struggling to create some alternatives to this model, they appear firmly rooted in their familiar forms of masculinity shaped by their working class backgrounds and, in many cases, from their street experiences.

George is an 18 year old father of a one-year old daughter. Before his daughter was born, he was engaged in a variety of delinquent activities. But since his girlfriend's pregnancy, he has re-enrolled in school and started working. Here he speaks about the changes he has made and the impact he plans to have on his daughter's life:

"I got to get ready for the little tea parties and stuff like that. You know what I mean? You got to be like sensitive to her. ... I love my daughter to death. I think she made me more of a man. She'll probably make me more sensitive ... instead of

being mad at the world and everything. ... When you are kid you need your father because your father teaches you right from wrong, they teach you how to act, teach you how you should treat a woman and everything. For a girl ... that's like the first man in your life so you know how you are supposed to be treated as a female. ... If a girl doesn't have that then she don't know what to be treated right is called. ... [Men] would be beating her and she just ... you can't have that. You got to (teach) your daughter what's right from wrong because you don't want your daughter like most of these women out here. ... I want her to have a relationship with me where she can be able to come up to me and talk to me about anything. ... If she likes a boy, she'll be able to talk to me about it. Not just her mother, she respects her. But I want to have that relationship. I don't want her hiding things from my back. So I want our relationship to be real good, tight. You know what I am saying? That's what I want."

"Being There"

Within many of our respondents' complex descriptions of fatherhood, lies an even greater and far simpler expectation they have of themselves as fathers: the expectation of "being there." This was construed in the majority of our interviews and was particularly emphasized among respondents who had grown up with absent or minimally involved fathers. Although "being there" is difficult to universally define, as it encompasses each individual's personal philosophy of what makes a father, "being there" is undeniably the belief that a father must play an active role in his child's life. "Being there" involves providing, making sacrifices, being an ear for one's children, and, even if a father is "non-custodial," making himself continuously available to his offspring. Steven summed up this perspective when asked, "So in your mind financially providing isn't enough by itself?"

"No, nowhere near it. I'd would much rather have had a poor-ass father that had no money and was always there for me than a rich-ass father that didn't do shit for me."

The fathers in our study have varying backgrounds; they are from rural Puerto Rico, Hartford's north end, Torrington, Willimantic and many other cities and towns across United States. Some are undocumented workers, others repeat felons; some work under-the-table jobs, others full-time, while a few own small businesses. All non-custodial and custodial fathers alike stress the importance of "being there" for their children, financially and emotionally, even, as we will see later, in instances in which they have not been.

Perhaps this struggle is best summed up in a quote from Patrick, a 23-year-old father of three, who has been in and out of the judicial system since his early teens. His father left him when he was three years old and committed suicide when Patrick was seven. He grew up in a contentious home with his older sister and mother who could not control him. As an adult, Patrick takes much pride in the time he spends with his children and although he is unable to find gainful employment, he is determined to provide his children with more opportunities in life than he has been afforded. All three of his children are with different mothers, and although he only lives with his latest child, he regularly sees his other two daughters four days out of the week. Currently unemployed, Patrick's lack of employment allows him the time to interact with his two "non-custodial" children, but limits his ideal of being a provider. Still, Patrick explains:

"Your life is not your life any more. Your life is for your child. ... That's a good father. ... A man that's actually going to give up his own life to raise yours ... and give you a better one than he might have even had. ... That's a good father."

Our respondents' fathering intentions are rooted in their own experiences. Experiences of being raised in a single parent or two parent home, whether abusive or not, nurturing or conflicted have shaped these men's ideas and ideals. In some cases, they wish to be the father their fathers were not, and for many, this involves simply being there. Others intend to reproduce the values and practices they observed in their homes, while others articulate an interest in improving on these. All fathers articulated the essential roles they intend to play in the lives of their children. As father's, they are struggling to put their ideals into practice, as imperfectly as that will happen.

In the next section we address what we considered the three most prominent themes that emerged from the analyses of our interviews: the struggles of inexperienced fathers and their search for guidance; the concerns that fathers expressed of not being able to meet their role as providers; and the existing co-occurrence of absent and present fathers.

NEW AND INEXPERIENCED FATHERS

One of the more pressing matters that emerged from these men's stories is the issue of inexperience. Several of these fathers voiced their concerns and fears about the difficult task of raising children. For some, these feelings derive from the more common fears of inadequacy that any young or new parent may feel; for others, these feelings occur within a context of having either no father figures or else poor models of fathering to emulate and learn from.

Sixty percent of fathers in our sample were first-time fathers, while a little less than 40% of first-time fathers were 20 years of age or younger at the

time of the child's birth.⁸ Steven, from Manchester represents the anxious inexperienced young father when he says, "I don't know what I am doing, of course. I am a kid ... I am 20 years old having a kid. But I try." Steven's words are common among young fathers, whose age restricts them from legally drinking alcohol but who still find themselves taking on one of the most demanding roles of adulthood -- being a parent.

An older father we interviewed, James, felt similarly; however, he was in his 40s. James told us, "Right now I am trying to be a father figure and trying to learn my own self and I am trying to teach myself a lot of things ... you know, it's like you never get a textbook with a child." James' case shows us that raising a child for the first time may be a daunting task, regardless of age. Perhaps 28-year-old Carlos summed it up best when he said, "Everything is new with your first child."

For others, however, being young or inexperienced was exacerbated by negative experiences with their own fathers, or what many of them considered as poor fathering models. This group of men expressed concerns about not knowing a set of behaviors to follow. These fathers broke down into roughly two categories: those who had no model because their father was absent or distant in their lives and those who had a poor model because their father was abusive or such an unsavory figure that his model of behavior was rejected.

The examples of bad parenting or "misparenting" usually included physical and/or emotional abuse, but occasionally could be described as just misguided or neglectful parenting. The physical partner abuse

⁸ When we include all fathers in our study, a little more than one-half of those we were able to document were 20 years or younger at the time of their first child's birth. We were unable to document this information for seven fathers.

detailed earlier in the report clearly stands out as horrid examples of fathering, which several respondents were exposed to. Further, some cases indicate that having an abuser for a father was worse than having an absent father. For instance, Felix told us that he was raised by his father to accept the abuse of women as normal, or at least to minimize it as a problem. He later became an abuser himself, and at 27 has already been incarcerated a few times for it. He told us, "My mom and my dad have always been my model, whether it's been bad or good."

The emotional abuse that was detailed by these fathers is often thought about as less hurtful than physical abuse, but it still left resentment and, in some cases, psychological scars. Emotional abuse was often related to broken promises made by their fathers. Steven describes:

"When I was a kid I always told myself, '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 ... He never came through with anything."

Steven's pain was compounded by the fact that his father always lived close by, yet still refused to be a part of his life. To this day, Steven can look out his window and see the house where his father lives, yet his father is still not in his life in any meaningful way; he has never even seen Steven's newborn child.

Whether due to physical or emotional abuse, or just the more general designation of being a "bad parent," many of our respondents rejected their fathers' behavior. Some of our respondents had rejected their behavior since childhood, but for others (like Felix who beat his partners as his father did) it took a long time to begin to turn the tide on those behaviors.

For the many respondents in our study, distant or absent fathers left an emotional gap in their lives. Some spoke of it in such heart wrenching terms that their pain was readily apparent, while others had grown cold about the subject. Regardless, most conveyed a deep desire to have their fathers in their lives and often showed bitterness at the rejection they felt. For instance, Patrick told us, "A father is something I've never had. It's something I always craved." Patrick was the most explicit about his need for a father. For others it was now a well worn story that had been recited many times. "I barely knew my father," Kane said. "I seen my father maybe like once or twice. The last time I saw my father I was about nine years old ... I don't know where he's at or nothing." Ray said, "I never had one. My dad left when I was two years old because he found the alcohol more important than me. So he was an alcoholic and still is."

Others attempted to invert the rejection of their fathers, expressing indifference toward them. Hector made a convincing case:

"I don't know my father like that. I didn't know him like that. The only thing I know about him is that he was a drug dealer and he is an addict now. That's it. I know where he live at. I been to his house, but he hid. He didn't come to the door. ... He don't want me, I tried to see him. So I feel the same way he feel, I don't care."

In addition to their sentiments regarding their fathers' rejection, many of our respondents also connected it to their own inexperience with fathering. Rex, a first time father, told us:

"I had like a house full of women. It was a little hard because you don't got that male role model. My father was never like [around]. ... You know, the black family got that broken home... I know you heard it like a million times but it's the truth."

Twenty-year-old J was the most direct in making this connection. In his mind the skills that one needs to be a father are passed down from father to son, and without that knowledge and experience, he feels disadvantaged when trying to raise his child:

"I love my [3 month old] daughter. I will always be there for my daughter. But sometimes she can get a handful because I am not used to being a dad. This is all new to me ... I never had a dad. ... My dad was never there. My dad was always locked up. ... So you ain't a dad, you're just a person that I call Dad."

As we see from J's narrative, inexperience can often lead to frustration. Similarly, 26 -year-old Harry acknowledges:

"Sometimes I feel a little stressed when the baby is crying and I don't know what to do. I don't know what she wants. ... I'd like to change how sometimes I get frustrated at her. I really shouldn't because she is only two months. I shouldn't be getting frustrated at her. ... I get frustrated too easy."

Raising a newborn for the first time, 34-year-old Charles told us about how he often gets frustrated as well. "I feel myself getting angrier than I should sometimes." He continues:

"Like if my son is just getting to a point where I can't take it anymore I will put him in his bassinette and I will turn off the monitor for 10 or 15 minutes, whatever it takes for me to level back down. Because I know that if I don't separate the two of us then it will just keep building. I do what's necessary to protect both of us."

Charles' words are concerning. His child is only 2 months old and he is only beginning what will no doubt be several more years of highly frustrating childrearing -- and he is already talking about a need to

separate himself from his child to “protect” the child from himself. In some respects, this is an important warning sign that Charles is able to articulate, giving him some opportunity to redress the situation.

There are many others in our sample experiencing similar, and in some cases, less articulated frustration with their children. Moreover, we suspect that given the prevalence of poor fathering examples, the anger associated with absent or abusive fathers, and some of the self-loathing we found among fathers stemming from a variety of sources (e.g., failing as family providers, self-doubts compounded by feelings of social marginalization, shame or guilt associated with past behaviors or decisions, and alienation with prior children) the likelihood of abusive or neglectful parenting is increased, and figuring this out and making adjustments on their own is challenging, if at all possible. As we noted in our first report, Kate Cavanaugh and her colleagues found that fathers who carried out the most extreme cases of physical abuse were often fathers who exhibited unreasonable expectations of children coupled with low tolerance levels of normal childhood behavior.⁹ In some respects, Charles and others may be sounding off warning signs, or even cries for help, recognizing their own frustrations and perhaps their limited capabilities.

That said, we hasten to add, that while we observed frustration and anger among many of our respondents - young and new fathers, as well as fathers who grew up without fathers or with poor parental models - many of them also articulated striking resilience and coping abilities. Their abilities to cope with the situation often started with a rejection of their own father’s behavior. These fathers used the example of fathering they had known (even if they had an absentee father) as a point of departure, as

⁹ K. Cavanaugh, R.E. Dobash & R.P. Dobash. 2007. “The Murder of Children by Fathers in the Context of Child Abuse,” *Child Abuse and Neglect* 31:737-746.

motivation to seek out alternatives that moved them in the opposite direction of their fathers. This point of view, often expressed strongly among our research subjects, represented the first step in their efforts to cope with and counter negative or absent parenting examples. As discussed earlier, sometimes their opposition was articulated as merely being present in the child's life. Jeremy told us, "I won't be like my father, just because I am going to be there for my kids." This theme was touched upon again and again as fathers insisted they would never do what had been done to them -- abandon their children. They felt abandoned and were adamant not to repeat the cycle. Danny told us:

"I would never be able to leave my daughter like my father left me. I don't see how someone could leave their child. I don't know what my father thinks ... but if that was me, I would be making something happen, you know what I'm saying?"

George concurred:

"I wouldn't have left [the family]. ... Even though him and my mom's relationship was hard ... I wouldn't have done that. ... Now I seen it from my own eyes, feel what I am saying? I am going to try to avoid that. I will do everything I can to ... keep the best situation possible."

For others, the opposition to their fathers' parenting behaviors was a larger critique of their father's lifestyles. Sam illustrates, "I learned from my father how *not* to live life. ... I learned what *not* to do. ... I didn't respect my father much, [and its] pretty much the same today." Sam's father was a "workaholic" who was never around, except to apply corporal punishment. He was also known to spend the family's money recklessly,

leading to power cutoffs and car repossessions, something that Sam has great disdain for.

Patrick expresses a more poignant sentiment:

“My father killed himself when I was 8. ... I had just started to get to know him when I was 7... and then I went over to his apartment and he was dead. ... It was a heroin overdose. ... I don't want to be anything like my father.”

Ray said, “I am not an alcoholic like my father. I am not an abuser, you know. I sit down and play with [my children]. I explain things to them. I read a book with them.” For Ray, his actions with and dedication to his own children are daily reminders of his rejection of his own father.

Lacking good examples to draw on as fathers, our respondents coped in different ways - but two primary strategies emerged in their efforts to reject their own fathers. Some relied on their mothers, and, as discussed earlier, described their mothers accordingly. “I’m straight,” Hector tells us, “my *mother* is my father,” using street language to tell us that his mother did a fine job of raising him regardless of his father’s absence.

We also found that the men usually built a composite model of fatherhood that was bits and pieces of different fathers or male figures in their lives - literally replacing the memories of their fathers, or lack thereof, with a collage of their own making. In some cases fathers would turn inward, claiming that their strength to find their own way, or create their own composite of a good father, exemplified their success as fathers. “I am my own father, you could probably say,” 19 year-old Javi tells us. He continues:

"You know what I am saying? Anything I see from any other families or any other father I pick up on that. ... I ask anybody around me, that's a good father? ... I use anything ... I'll probably read a book or something ... you know you are a father and you got to know a lot, man. You need to know. So I just kept asking for help. You got to have help. ... I will ask mainly anyone."

Charlie said:

"I can't say my stepfather was a father role model because I never really got along with him. He don't see his kids either -- like my dad -- so ... I don't know. I feel like I learned from everybody's mistakes really. There is not one person ... I mean there are people with certain traits I could point out of a certain person. ... I take different things from other people and I'll either make it better or I'll change it."

The father's resilience to what amounts to both a familial and social breakdown was often present, even though several of them admitted to committing the same mistakes as their fathers (or generally carrying out negative parenting traits). However, despite their resiliency, some of them made it clear that their own coping methods were more of a survival tactic, and not necessarily a general strategy to recommend to others like themselves. For these fathers, there is a strong need for programmatic assistance to help facilitate their desires to be 'good fathers.' "I am learning, you know what I'm saying," J tells us. He continues:

"Little by little it's coming to me. Learning how to do what I have to do... because there are not that many places that [have] 'father classes.' My girlfriend meets with a lady [NFN home visitor] ... and I asked her if there were any father classes and she said the only person was [the interviewer] that [I] could talk to. I was like 'wow.' They need more ... I wish there was something like that. That would be

hot, you know what I am saying? Being able to talk to a guy about how to do this and how to do that."

Steven echoed J's sentiments almost verbatim after the tape recorder was shut off, asking the interviewer if there were any home visitors or classes for fathers in the area where he lived because he wanted to better his fathering skills. Steven felt it was unfair that mothers get assistance but that he knew of no similar programs for men.

One of our respondents is attending a parenting class, operated by the NFN. "Just so I knew what I was doing," Ray told us, "I joined parenting classes, just so I can understand what a father role was supposed to be. Because I never had one."

It is clear from our interviews with newer and inexperienced fathers that many are struggling with the challenges of parenting, often without good fathering models or even fathers to confide in about their struggles. Some are articulating their frustrations, sending out cries for help, while others muddle through, trying their best not to follow the patterns laid down by their fathers. The potential benefits of program intervention are most apparent in these men's stories.

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF BEING THE FAMILY PROVIDER

As we discussed earlier, our respondents regularly expressed the expectation that being a good father required that they financially provide for their children and families. This expectation, derived from the larger culture, was seen as a dominant part of their role as fathers. However, in many instances, these views were inconsistent with the economic reality of their lives. In other words, fathers clearly understand their purported

social role and struggled with *wanting* to be adequate providers, but often fell short. The current economic climate has made it particularly difficult for respondents with criminal records or without proper immigrant documentation. Like family background experiences, employment patterns also varied among our respondents, and clearly the likelihood of meeting the provider role varied accordingly. We provide a few case studies below from our interviews to illustrate this variation.

Working Full-Time Jobs

Robert is a perfect example of a father who has internalized the “provider perspective” and carried it out in his life. Robert watched his father, in a single-father home (his mother died early in his life), work long days to support Robert and his siblings. His views are self-admittedly shaped and formed by his father’s example. Like many of the men we interviewed, Robert asserts, “a father I think should have a full-time job, should put food on the table, should pay the bills.” Robert did a stint in the military and has worked full-time ever since. He lives with the mother of his newborn daughter and provides testimony to his success in meeting his role as provider and head-of-the-household: “My wife don’t work, I am the only one that works. The bills are paid. The rent is paid. There is food on the table. I think I’m doing just as good as my own dad was.”

For Robert, he is living up to his father’s, his own, and the larger society’s expectations of being a family provider and good father.

For fathers who had secured consistent full-time jobs, the thought of losing their jobs and their ability to provide provoked fear and stress. “I pay all my child’s mother’s bills,” Rex told us. He continued:

“I want everything to be right, at least if it’s within my means and I can do it, then I’ll do it. ... It would really eat me up if I was unemployed. I can’t do it. I don’t

care what it is. I am bringing some money into this house. That would hurt my pride. It would hurt my heart and feelings ... because I don't want to not ... provide."

Of course, with rising unemployment, this fear is well founded, and for many fathers in our study, even with full-time jobs, the economic picture is daunting. When asked what would help him to be a better father, even Robert answered, "More money... [improving] the economy in general." Despite full-time work, Robert feels the economic squeeze, especially as the sole income earner in his household. Failure, Robert insists, is not an option and conflating his provider role with his status as a father makes him vulnerable in an economy he cannot possibly control. But Robert fights this battle from a relatively successful position compared to many other fathers in our study.

Underemployment

Another father we interviewed, Carlos, described a similar situation of being the sole provider in the house, "My wife and son depend on me. If I give up, what is going to become of them? I have a year-and-a-half-old son and my wife's pregnant now." Carlos' wife used to work but hasn't in a while because of the pregnancy. Unlike Robert and Rex, however, Carlos' work is not steady or consistent. "The only problem I have now is the economy, finding work," he tells us. "There are times that I work from eight in the morning until six in the afternoon. There are times that I can work six days, and there are times that I only work three days. It depends on what the weather is like." The pressure Carlos feels due to economic conditions is sometimes overwhelming, but he manages somehow:

"I've thought that I want to throw in the towel. But no, no, no, like people say, running away is for cowards. ... I wish I could give my wife more, my family..."

when you see [your child], you just feel like working harder. You worry more for him. ... He can't defend himself."

Carlos represents the fathers who are underemployed; they have less than full-time employment or else employment with wages so low that it's very difficult to make ends meet. Marcos illustrates, "Sometimes the construction [work] isn't enough money," he explained. "I'm not always working so sometimes I work once or twice a month." With such spotty employment, Marco is on the lower end of the ranks of the underemployed.

Marco and Carlos' situations are compounded by their work status, both are undocumented immigrants, or as Marco put it, "You don't have the opportunity because without papers [in America] you can't do anything." Both are also fathers attempting to provide for their children.

Underemployment, however, was not reserved only for immigrants. Several fathers in our study expressed similar concerns about their economic statuses and their roles as providers. Without full-time *and steady* employment, the future seems very tenuous for fathers like Todd, from New Haven:

"I am just trying to work and get all the basic things my daughter needs so she won't have to want for nothing. But it's crazy being like that, in a job with the temp agency, it's not everyday. If I had an everyday job then it would be all right because I would be like 'All right, I work every day. So it's not a problem for me.' But like I got to scrape little odds and ends. ... We do the best we can."

For Charles, the temp agencies are a last resort between bouts of more steady employment, but something he readily turns to when other

employment opportunities disappear. "Go to Labor Ready, work a day, pay a day, whatever it takes to get back on my feet," he told us. Charles' whatever-it-takes philosophy is respectable, if not heroic, but it is challenged regularly by the reality of job opportunities. He continues:

"Obviously, being able to provide better makes for being able to parent better because you have less stress at that point. ... I've had 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."

Another profile of underemployment in our study involved 18-year-old George. Even though George currently lives in a group home and his child lives with its mother and her family, he still insists on fulfilling the provider role of father. To do so, he has three part-time jobs. "I'd do anything for [my baby]," George told us:

"Even though I am not there, I do as much as I can. ... Financially I want to be able to take care of everything, that's why I have three jobs. I want to be able to have everything paid for financially."

George works part-time at a small clothing retailer in a shopping mall, stocking shelves, at a temp agency that has placed him at a factory making lotion, and also at the group home where he resides. He is scraping together everything he can, while finishing high school. He proudly states, "I give my girlfriend \$100 every week every time I see her. And anything else that needs to be paid for like when I am there I'll buy it."

George makes sure that we know he is providing for his child, reaffirming his identity as father. While he is young and aspires to complete high school and acquire more remunerative full time employment, his

precarious status is shared by many other fathers in our study who are navigating the treacherous borders of the economy, often working part-time jobs, under-the-table jobs, or suffering the indignities of unemployment.

Unemployment

The frustration felt by the underemployed is dwarfed by that of the unemployed. Patrick emotionally states, “Man, I got kids I need to feed. Are you kidding me! ... I get overwhelmed and impatient about like not having a job, that’s a huge part of my life right now.” Luckily, in this household, the mother of Patrick’s children is working, while the household is receiving temporary state assistance.

Sam’s household also receives state assistance, although it is not his preference. “Money could help me be a better father,” Sam exclaims. “I just got to wait every first of the month to get money [from the state]. I am tired of that, man. It’s hard to find a job.”

For several of the fathers we interviewed, their criminal records stood between them and employment. Nathan elaborates:

“Its 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 ... it’s through a temp service. They are not lasting. The little bit of money I get, child support want that.”

Nathan considers himself unemployed even though he occasionally gets work from a temp agency. Interestingly, he was the second father to indicate that the work he receives from the temp agency is so inconsistent that it is not even referred to as employment.

Eric, an unemployed, 21-year old, from Milford, was laid off from his last job and had (at that time) already obtained a felony conviction due to possession of narcotics, to which he is addicted. Since he is unemployed and in recovery, he gets to spend time with his daughter that he normally would not, which he enjoys, but it nevertheless leaves him feeling as if he is not fulfilling his duty as a family provider:

"To get a job right now, that would probably make me a better dad just because I want to be there like financially also. So that's one of the things I want to work on right now. ... I know like applying online like once you hit [the] felony [box] they just stop it right then and there. So I just have to look around. ... It's been five months since I've had a job now, that's probably the longest I've ever had no job since I was like sixteen. ... I've been applying like crazy. ... When I first got laid off I was going like every day from 7 A.M. to 5 P.M. just straight up, just every single place I see just stop in and going in like a suit ... just telling them my whole story, 'I got a kid coming' and all this. But I guess they just weren't hiring around here."

Eric feels rejected by employers, and is no longer pursuing employment at the frenzied rate he once did, claiming his local options have been exhausted. With a four-month-old-child, his bout of unemployment could not have come at a worse time. He expressed frustration and dejection while also expressing hopes of landing any type of employment.

These men's stories about economic hardship and struggle – and how they were related to their views on fathering – are a concern, not just for them, but for state and program leaders who have an interest in facilitating better relationships between fathers and their children. If the provider role of the father is as deeply important to our fathers as our interviews suggest, and

if this expectation is widely shared by the larger culture, then what is to become of those fathers who cannot find gainful employment?

Certainly there is some veracity to their claims. Income and employment prospects have declined considerably for less educated populations over the past 30 years, while the current economic recession has exacerbated these circumstances. With a formal unemployment rate in Connecticut reaching over 8% at the end of this year, the poorly educated fathers in our sample, with little formal job training, criminal records, or who lack documentation to work legal jobs are not likely to meet the expectations that they and others have of being a provider for their children. Failure to meet these expectations may result in self-loathing and in stigma, both of which can, in turn, have negative effects on parenting.

State and program leaders will need to find ways to address this larger, structural problem, while at the same time trying to preserve the value of fathering that is separate from the provider role and that emphasizes the emotional connection between fathers and their children. The material and emotional sides of fathering, however, are not easily separated among the men in our study, or among many in the larger society. Further, the stability that is necessary to engage in healthy parenting requires a modicum of material support.

As Marco, an undocumented immigrant who is struggling himself, said to us, "I have an uncle that has kids here and they live in a [homeless] shelter and the government helps them because they have their papers. They are *citizens* and their life is really hard."

PRESENT/ABSENT FATHERS: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Much of the public discourse on the subject of fatherhood invokes the pejorative concept of the 'deadbeat dad.' In popular terms, the concept refers to fathers who have abandoned their children, failing to pay child support and avoiding other parental responsibilities. Undertaking a research study on fatherhood, we were cognizant of the concept's prevalence, but did not expect to recruit many, if any, fathers who fit this description into our study. The reason is twofold: they are presumably not around and therefore not accessible, and, since in many instances, the child support enforcement division of the state may be pursuing them, we expected them to be even less likely to participate in a study that is funded by and is reporting to the state.

Nevertheless, we successfully reached a group of fathers who *were technically absentee fathers to some of their children*. The children they had discontinued contact with were always older children from previous relationships, corresponding with research that shows the precipitous drop in fatherly involvement that occurs after biological parents separate.¹⁰ In our study, 40% of fathers had children prior to the target child (the child in the NFN program), and a little less than one-half of these men had no contact with their prior children. Some of these fathers had at one time been involved in their children's lives, while others had made no efforts at all and had practically zero contact.

For their current children - the NFN target child - they are *present* fathers; fathers that *are* involved in their children's lives. But for some of their previous children, they are absent fathers who might be tagged with the demeaning label "deadbeat dad." In short, their lives defy such easy and

¹⁰ See for instance A. Claessens. 2007. "Gatekeeper Moms and (Un)Involved Dads: what Happens After a Breakup," in *Unmarried Couples with Children*, eds. Paula England and Kathryn Edin. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

popular designation, for they are both - present and absent fathers. Our interviews with this subset of present/absent fathers provide a unique opportunity to explore the fathers' explanations for their absence in their older children's lives as well as their views on fatherhood in general.

Several of the fathers alluded to the mother's gatekeeping role we discussed earlier, blaming the mothers for preventing them from staying in contact with their children. Others took personal responsibility and said they were not ready or were "too wild" at that point in their lives to be a dad. Still, others mentioned systemic issues like prison sentences that put distance between their children and themselves; biased visitation and custody judgments that favored the mother; or unaffordable child support payments which 'forced' the father to remain off the proverbial radar screen and out of the child's life. Perhaps, most interestingly, some of our respondents displayed a cognitive dissonance about their own absenteeism, joining the popular condemnation against absentee fathers when they themselves fit the definition. Finally, some said they wished to reconcile with their estranged children and become a part of their lives, while others seemed ambivalent about that or felt that reconciliation would be impossible.

James is in his 40s and had his first child, a girl, in his home state of New York when he was 16. He met the classic deadbeat dad profile for more than two decades. "[A relationship with] my oldest daughter? There isn't one. ... I've seen her a few times. ... She is married now and has a daughter..." James told us. And although James, like others, blamed the mother of his daughter and the mother's parents, he was also one of the few fathers in this group that took personal responsibility and put it front and center. "I was such an alcoholic then. ... I was kind of too much into partying so it wasn't like I was trying to be a father figure," he lamented.

Like James, Hector, now in his mid-30s, had a child when he was much younger whom he has never been involved with. Hector and James also have something else in common; they both served rather long prison sentences. For James, prison may have combined with his alcoholism to produce estrangement between himself, his daughter and her mother, but he says little about the effects of prison on his relationships. In Hector's story, we see these connections more clearly.

Hector told us things were rocky from the beginning, "My oldest daughter is 18. I wasn't there [for her]. ... I was young. I didn't know how to take care of no kid," he admitted. Hector was not, however, totally absent, and was adamant that she "got to know I was her daddy," even if he was not around much. Their already severely underdeveloped relationship, however, was further stunted when Hector was sentenced to prison soon after her birth. "I went to jail and then came out. ... It wasn't [like] pick up where I left off ... I didn't do nothing with her ... probably McDonald's or something like that. That's it," he admitted.

Both Hector and James were more forthright in their admissions of blame in their estranged relationships with their older children than others in the group - most blamed the mothers. In fact, several claimed that their failed relationships with their children were not their fault at all. Instead, they argued that the mothers had either moved to another state, making it impossible for them to see their children, or else had exercised their gatekeeping role, often in conjunction with other family members, in preventing them from gaining access to their children.

Jeremy is a young father in his mid 20s who has seen his oldest child - a seven year old boy - only once. "I don't have [a relationship with him],"

Jeremy said. "His mother took off on me when he was three weeks old. ... I seen him one time when he was three weeks old and that was it ... he's in Florida." Jeremy blames the mother for intentionally leaving the area, claiming that the maternal grandmother is a racist who could not accept his mixed racial heritage and exerted pressure on her daughter to prohibit any involvement with the child after the separation.

Two other respondents, who like Jeremy, expressed anger at and blamed the mothers for their lack of involvement with their previous children, went a step further by engaging in diatribes against the injustices of the legal system and state child support enforcement. Nathan is a 27-year-old father from Hartford, who has not seen his seven-year-old son since he was two. "I am not really seeing him due to his mother..." he says. "Even though I pay child support, she still won't let me see him." Nathan continues:

"I went for the visitation [program] thing and it's like really I get no help; none at all. ... It's a whole bunch of runaround. It's like where are our rights as fathers and stuff like that? Why everything she say you all believe what she say? And y'all don't ever want to believe what the man have to say. ... I get the runaround. ... That's a touchy subject; I really don't like speaking about it. ... [What if I] never see my oldest son again..."

Charles, a 33 year-old father living in Norwich, has two previous children from different mothers and is absent in both children's lives. In the case of his eldest, now 15, he blames the mother for his lack of involvement. According to him, she feels he is a "deadbeat dad" who joined the Navy for a four year stint and abandoned her and the child. He argues to the contrary, that he did it to provide a better future for the child. "She contacted me accusing me of being a deadbeat dad and everything else..."

Charles explained. "She says, 'Well you are the one who left us,' yada, yada, yada. And I was like, 'Well I joined the military so I could provide insurance and everything like that for him. ... I was trying to secure a better future.'" But even after his service in the Navy, Charles did little to build a relationship with his eldest son.

Charles is also absent in the life of his second child, and it was when he talked about his "little girl" – his first and only daughter – that he addressed the issue of child support, the problems he has supporting three children on his salary, and the mother of his second child's intolerance of his lack of financial support. He continues:

"I haven't been able to keep up with child support. I won't deny that. It isn't for a lack of wanting to, it's for a lack of being able to. So, obviously my other child that I've had ... I had a little girl, same issue [as the first child], unable to provide child support. ... Unfortunately, because of conversations with [the mother] ... 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."

Charles' case particularly reflects the complexity of this issue, or more specifically, the triangulation that occurs between the mother and child, the father, and child support agency that conflates the material and emotional struggles of familial relationships after separation or divorce occurs. Charles wants an informal arrangement with the mother to provide material assistance rather than having his paycheck garnished by the state, which he claims he cannot afford. He asserts, "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 rent."

Further, Charles asserts that the relationships with his children and their mothers have deteriorated largely because of his inability to pay. "Now it's getting to be all about money and it shouldn't be like that," he says. "I understand it's hard, you know, raising a child. I have one."

Currently, two of Charles' three children receive no financial assistance from him whatsoever. He justifies this in two ways. First, he argues there is not enough money to go around. "Yes, financially speaking child support helps [a mother]. But there is another child who is going to suffer if you force it," Charles explains, referring to his custodial newborn who will suffer if he has to pay child support for his other children. Second, he claims that because the mother has involved the child support agency, she is getting even less from him than she could if she would comply with his terms. "Find a way of balancing things," he insists:

"even it its only \$20 for three or four packages of generic diapers. ... I mean it's not much but... that's that much less that the mother has to worry about. ... Whereas when the system takes everything a guy has ... we look like deadbeats because we are not giving the [court] information as to where we live or where we work or whatever. ... So, it's tough. ... 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?"

On one hand, Charles appears indifferent toward, if not neglectful of, his prior children. He fails to acknowledge the financial hardships of their mothers and he obfuscates his own responsibility as the biological father of his prior two children. He seems to selfishly concern himself only with his most recent child whom he lives with, along with his wife. On the other hand, Charles' case illustrates a larger pattern that many low income

families are confronting – how to support children across different households when employment is lacking, or when wages are insufficient.

Based upon Charles' past hardships concerning unemployment and homelessness that we reported earlier, he is clearly one of the more economically marginalized respondents in our pool. It is entirely possible that given his employment prospects that he does not and will not make enough money to provide for, or even contribute much toward, his children across three households. Of course, we could adopt a moralistic framework by arguing that he got himself into this mess by fathering children with different mothers, and therefore he needs to take responsibility for them. And certainly his unwillingness to work with the mothers and the courts on the issue makes him an even less sympathetic character. But this position still begs the questions – how do we support children in multiple family circumstances when wages are meager and how do we intervene in a manner so that emotional connections between non-custodial parents and their children are not further jeopardized by wage limitations. A 2007 study conducted by the Urban Institute further demonstrates this problem. Nationally, unpaid child support debt now exceeds \$100 billion and, based upon their nine-state study, they estimate that 70 percent of this debt belongs to fathers who make \$10,000 or less income per year.¹¹

Interestingly, Charles status as both a present and absent father helps him to navigate the stigma of the “deadbeat dad.” In fact, while Charles provides *no* material support to two of his children and is dodging child support, he provided some of the *harsh*est criticisms of so-called deadbeat dads. He continues:

¹¹ E. Sorensen, L. Sousa & S Schaner. 2007. *Assessing Child Support Arrears in Nine Large States and the Nation*. Washington D.C.: The Urban Institute

"I can't speak for every other father out there that has children that aren't in his home. Yes, there are a lot of jerks out there that [are like], 'You know what? I don't want the kid. Your problem. I don't want to hear about it. Leave my money alone.' I've met guys like that. Personally, I think they need to be castrated, you know? That way they can't father kids. It's like if you are going to go out and enjoy the intimate life with the women, at least be willing to be a father to the kids ... own up to the responsibility. You are the dad, you are the father and say, 'I want to be a part in the kid's life as much as the child will have me.' It doesn't take a lot of anything to do that. Like I said, even just diapers every week."

Jeremy also displayed cognitive dissonance when his perspective on fathering was applied to his own actions. When asked if he was going to be like his own absentee father when raising his children he said, "No! ... Just because I am going to be there for my kids." And later in the interview he tells us that every child "should have a father in his life." But Jeremy has only seen his seven-year-old son once in his life.

Jeremy and Charles both have created a narrative of what they are like as fathers, and both make striking claims against the stigma of the deadbeat dad, even when for all intents and purposes their behavior meets their own definition of a deadbeat dad. This apparent contradiction seems to reflect the powerful symbolism of the term as well as the moral value they are attempting to squeeze from their involvement in at least one of their children's lives.

The complexity of issues surrounding non-custodial fatherhood are invoked by our interviews, even though on the surface, virtually all of these fathers are present in the lives of the target NFN child. The pot is stirred by the difficulty of managing blended families, the emotional

fallout of divorce and separation, the problem of insufficient earnings and economic prospects, and the subsequent duress that sometimes occurs as child support enforcement agencies and family courts attempt to mitigate these messy situations. Despite these complexities, several fathers expressed, what appeared to us to be genuine interests in finding ways to reconcile with their estranged children, many of whom have now grown into adults. While many bemoaned the grim prospects for reconciliation, one of them had begun to make a little headway.

Hector's explanation for his absence in his daughter's life is that it was "normal at the time" (in the late 1980s) for a young inexperienced father to be uninvolved in his child's life. Although Hector was gone for most of her childhood and she is now a mother herself, there seems to have been a small amount of reconciliation. "She know who her father is," Hector tells us repeatedly, distinguishing his daughter from the caricature of the child often featured on the popular daytime talk show, the "Maury Povich Show," in which paternity tests are publicly revealed for children who do not know who their fathers are. "She come see me," he explains, "so I don't see nothing wrong with our relationship. ... [S]he got pregnant too young [though], like 17 [Hector laughs]. I see it as it ain't nothing new. It ain't nothing new. Look how we are living."

Hector is critical of himself and his daughter, as well as a lifestyle that results in early births. He reclaims a modicum of dignity by having some relationship with his daughter and insisting that at least she knows who her father is. For others, reconciliation is more difficult.

James also has a grown daughter who is apparently seeking contact with him. He continues, "What I understand from my sister ... [is that my daughter] has a [phone] number and she wants me to call her and contact

her. She is married now and has a daughter also. ... She wants me to contact [her]"

James confides to the interviewer that he would "love to have a relationship with her." But he doesn't make the call. When James was asked frankly why he does not comply with his daughter's requests, he displayed thinly veiled trepidation at having to face their past, or lack thereof, "[A relationship with my eldest daughter] would be something I want but I don't want it to be where it comes to terms where you got to sit there and ... where do you start? What do you do?"

The topic made him obviously uncomfortable. His response suggests that he either feels he does not have the interpersonal skills to navigate their reconciliation or that he is too ashamed of his past behavior to face his daughter. We suspect that James represents other absent fathers who face a similar dilemma - a desire to connect, but fear of not knowing how to make that first step and of confronting their past negligence. This is clearly a point of intervention where a support program might be useful.

Other respondents with estranged children would seemingly love to be in James' position. Their relationships with former children have broken down within the triangulated set of relations between the fathers, mothers, and child support system, and most have pretty much given up. These fathers seem defeated, resigned to absence, with little hope otherwise.

When Jeremy was asked if he felt sad about not being in his eldest son's life, he responded, "Oh, yeah, I sit there and just look at his picture and think about him. ... There is really nothing I can do about it," he insists. "I don't talk to his mother at all." Jeremy has given up initiating contact because he sees his prospects as impossible.

Nathan told us earlier that he doubts he will ever see his oldest son again, and since he sees the system as against him, he has made no recent efforts to change this. Charles sees no chance of getting involved in his eldest son's life. Charles' family had maintained contact with his first child, even though Charles made little effort. He explains that the mother's "grandfather, which was the main contact that my family had to know what was going on stopped returning their calls. ... It's been about five years now that we don't know what's going on." As discussed above, the chances of reconciling with his second child does not appear much better.

As these stories suggest, reunification with children and father involvement can be challenging, especially after relationships with mothers and children turn sour. While the prospects for engaging their estranged children are by and large quite grim for many fathers, with assistance, they might be improved upon. The triangulation that occurs between the fathers, mothers and children, and child support enforcement and family courts is difficult for all parties to navigate, and attempting to intervene in these processes will be likewise difficult and challenging. Delineating fathers' perspectives and motivations, state policies, emotional tensions and disruptions, and material conditions will be the on-going efforts of our study, with the hopes of identifying some useful strategies and points for program intervention.

CONCLUSION

In a sense, this report serves as an opportunity to introduce the 35 fathers in our study. As we have seen, they are a diverse group in residential location, race and ethnicity, age, family backgrounds, and in parenting experiences, perspectives, expectations, and circumstances.

Respondents raised by both biological parents tended to describe their families as traditional working-class families, with both parents working, but the father as the primary breadwinner. They also tended to describe their fathers as strict disciplinarians, with limited emotional involvement in their lives. Although mothers worked, they were the primary caretakers of the home and children, and the ones our respondents relied on mostly as nurturers and confidants.

In single parent homes, other male family members, mostly uncles and grandfathers, were involved in our respondents' lives. In general, respondents expressed a lot of respect and gratitude for single mothers and fathers, and described single mothers as being both their "mom and their dad." Those respondents who were involved in criminal activities tended to absolve their mothers of any responsibility for their poor judgments, arguing that their mothers did all they could. They also indicated that a harsh father figure in the home might have straightened them out, and that their resistance toward parental authority was often too much for their mothers to handle by themselves.

One of the more interesting findings was that the respondents tended to reject stepfathers as father figures in their lives, even when stepfathers faithfully reached out to them. Several indicated that their biological fathers were irreplaceable, even when they had been absent in their lives.

Nearly one-half of respondents had experienced physical abuse in their homes, often directed at their mothers, and in some cases toward them and their siblings. Several respondents struggled to understand these incidents in the context of continuing relationships with their fathers, often attempting to condemn the actions without condemning their fathers.

When we explored fathering perspectives and practices among our respondents, they tended to emphasize two primary roles – father as provider and as caretaker. As providers, they emphasized and worried about meeting expectations of being breadwinners for their families. As caretakers, they seemed conflicted about their roles as disciplinarians, and hoped that they would establish relationships with their children that encouraged open and honest communication. Interestingly, respondents with criminal, and sometimes incarceration, histories were more likely to emphasize the importance of open communication with their children. Respondents also talked about the importance of being role models for their children, with several seeing different value in this for boys and girls. For boys, they wanted to provide a model of self-discipline and respectability for their sons to emulate, while, for girls, they emphasized the importance demonstrating how their daughters should expect to be treated by men as they grew up.

Finally, many of our respondents emphasized the importance of simply “being there” for their children. As we might expect, this was a particularly salient theme among respondents whose fathers had been absent in their own upbringing.

There were three themes that emerged in the course of our analysis that served as the backbone of this report: the inexperience of young and/or new fathers and their search for parenting guidance and support; the expressed concerns among fathers who are falling short of meeting their expectations as the family provider; and the dilemmas of fathers with prior children who have either given up or are struggling to parent across different households.

In the former, the typical anxieties of new, inexperienced fathers were often exacerbated by their own family histories of fathers who were either absent or provided poor models for parenting. Many of these new fathers were struggling with the frustrations of crying infants and the reorganization of homes around the needs of newborns, and often feeling alone in their struggles with few places to turn for advice or guidance. Some articulated how they were using whatever resources they could access, including their own mothers and family members, to find their way through this difficult, challenging, and yet hopeful time in their lives. Several explicitly stated that they would benefit from support groups or parenting programs.

The second theme – their concerns with failing to meet their role as economic provider – was prominent, irrespective of whether respondents were working or not. Those working feared of losing their jobs, while others expressed anxieties about being under- or unemployed, and the negative effects this might have on their children. Poorly educated respondents with limited job skills and/or criminal records are simply not faring well in an unforgiving economy.

Finally, we also explored perspectives among respondents, who were both present and absent fathers – present in the lives of recently born children, but absent in older children’s lives. Most of them blamed the mothers of their children for refusing them access to their children. Some identified systemic causes, such as prison sentences that disrupted their relationships with their children, unsympathetic and punitive courts and child support agencies, and unaffordable child support payments which pushed them out of their children’s lives. A few claimed responsibility themselves, stating that they were too young and irresponsible to behave as fathers in older children’s lives. To defend themselves against harsh social

judgments, all of them emphasized their current parental commitments to their younger children.

The information for this report only reflects the first interviews we conducted with the fathers in our study. We are attempting to complete up to four interviews with each of them. At present, we have conducted 17 second interviews, 5 third interviews, and 2 fourth interviews. Interviews will continue until the summer and a final report will be available in December. In addition to the themes developed in this report, we expect that more will emerge as our data collection and analyses continue. In the final report, we also intend to provide policy and program recommendations based upon the lessons learned from our research.