

Policies and Programs Affecting Fathers

A State-by-State Report

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This report presents information on policies and programs that support the engagement of fathers with their children in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. We are particularly interested in low-income, nonresident fathers, and, where feasible, we present data that address their circumstances and the challenges they face. The report covers ten areas of public policy: child support, child welfare, criminal justice, early childhood, education, employment, family law, food and housing, health and mental health, and responsible fatherhood. In each area, we present state-by-state information on the adoption of a variety of policies and programs that have the potential to support parent-child contact and/or ameliorate the barriers to parent-child contact that low-income, nonresident fathers face. Our goals are to create a baseline of supportive father policies and programs against which future change might be assessed; highlight underlying barriers to positive father engagement at the state level; provide a roadmap for states and stakeholders to pursue who are interested in advancing father involvement and increasing equity; stimulate better measurement of father engagement; and inspire research on the impact of state-level policies on the status of fathers, children, and families.

Low-income, nonresident fathers are disproportionately comprised of minority men who face racially-biased policies and practices at the system level. They are victims of long-term structural changes in the economy that penalize lower- and middle-skilled, less-educated male workers. All too often, their lives are shaped by low educational achievement, joblessness, criminal justice involvement, and out-of-wedlock childbearing.¹ Table 1 shows a picture of such low-income, nonresident fathers. It is based on information drawn from the 10,173 nonresident parents who owed child support (hereinafter called noncustodial parents or NCPs) in

¹ Smeeding, T. M., Garfinkel, I., & Mincy, R. B. (2011). Young disadvantaged men: Father, families, poverty and policy. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 635, 6-23.

eight states and enrolled in the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED), a national demonstration program funded by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) to test the effectiveness of employment programs for NCPs during 2013–2018.^{2,3}

Chapter 1, Table 1. Selected Demographic Characteristics and Barriers Among CSPED

Participants	
Male	90%
Less than a high school degree or GED	26%
Racial minority	73%
Never married	52%
Children with more than one partner	62%
Had not worked in the 30 days prior to project enrollment	48%
Average monthly earnings, if worked	\$769
Ever convicted for a crime	68%
Homeless, lives in a halfway house, or pays reduced rent	44%
At risk for moderate to severe depression	23%
Average monthly child support order at project enrollment	\$401
Percentage who owe at least half of monthly earnings in child support	58%
No in-person contact with youngest child in past 30 days	40%
Did not see child as much as they wanted	80%

Source: Cancian, M., Meyer, D., & Wood, R. (2019). *Final impact findings from the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED)*. Institute for Research on Poverty. Retrieved from <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CSPED-Final-Impact-Report-2019-Compliant.pdf>.

Low-income, nonresident fathers often struggle to stay involved with their children. Unlike marital family law—which spells out the rights and responsibilities that divorcing parents have following their breakup and requires a comprehensive divorce order that addresses custody, parenting time, child support, and property division—there are no established guidelines for unmarried parents specifying the father's visitation rights and no clear pathways to the legal proceedings that formalize issues such as custody and parenting time. As a result, unmarried, nonresident fathers routinely get a child support order upon application by the custodial parent or the state if the custodial parent pursues public benefits like Temporary Assistance for Needy Children (TANF) (and in some states Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)), without any mention of parenting time.^{4,5} According to child support data from the Census Bureau, between 2007 and 2015, the proportion of custodial mothers and nonresident fathers who failed to come to a formal or informal agreement specifying visitation rights and a child support order amount grew from 43% to 55%, while the proportion of fathers who had no contact with their children in the past year remained at 35%.⁶

2 Cancian, M., Meyer, D., & Wood, R. (2019). *Final impact findings from the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED)*. Institute for Research on Poverty. Retrieved from <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CSPED-Final-Impact-Report-2019-Compliant.pdf>.

3 Sorensen, E. (2021). *What we learned from recent federal evaluations of programs serving disadvantaged noncustodial parents*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/what-we-learned-about-programs-serving-disadvantaged-noncustodial-parents>.

4 Pearson, J. (2015). Establishing parenting time in child support cases: New opportunities and challenges. *Family Court Review*, 53(2), 246–257.

5 Pearson, J., & Byrne, A. (2020). *Parenting time and child support: Information for fatherhood programs and fathers*. Information Brief. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. Retrieved from <https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/parenting-time-and-child-support-information-fatherhood-programs-and-fathers>.

6 Zill, N. (2019). *The new fatherhood is not benefiting children who need it most*. Institute for Family Studies. Retrieved from <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-new-fatherhood-is-not-benefiting-children-who-need-it-most>.



Multiple factors contribute to fathers' lack of involvement with children, including tenuous and conflictual relationships with the child's mother, mothers and fathers forming new romantic relationships, and both parents having children with multiple partners. Other barriers pertain to the father's inability to meet basic needs including housing, health care, substance abuse, unemployment and underemployment, inability to fulfill child support obligations, lack of education, and history of incarceration.⁷ Despite these challenges, many of these fathers are able to stay involved with their children, and when they are positively involved, children have better outcomes, including higher levels of academic achievement, fewer behavior problems, better peer relationships, and increased social-emotional competence.^{8, 9, 10}

Children in single-parent households are a focus of public policy concern for several reasons. They are four times more likely to live in poverty and demonstrate negative outcomes including doing poorly in schools, having emotional and behavioral problems, becoming teenage parents, and having poverty level incomes as adults.¹¹ They also have a dramatic impact on the public purse. An analysis of the annual expenditures made by the federal government in 13 major programs to help support father-absent homes concluded that they are conservatively at least \$99.8 billion.¹²

State-level policies and programs affect the ability of low-income, nonresident fathers to obtain access to their children and/or overcome the economic, legal, social, and psychological barriers and inequities that frequently impede father-child involvement. By providing a state-by-state look at some of the major policies and programs that affect these fathers in key areas, we highlight what some supportive policies look like and the states that have adopted them. We also identify data gaps and the indicators of father-supportive policies that would be helpful but are not available.

7 Edin, K., & Nelson, T. (2013). *Doing the best I can: Fatherhood in the inner city*. University of California Press.

8 Adamson, K., & Johnson, S. K. (2013). An updated and expanded meta-analysis of nonresident fathering and child well-being. *Journal of Family Psychology, 27*(4), 589–599.

9 Coates, E. E., & Phares, V. (2019). Pathways linking nonresident father involvement and child outcomes. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 28*(6), 1681–1694.

10 Osborne, C., Boggs, R., & McKee, B. (2021). *Importance of father involvement*. Child and Family Research Partnership, LBJ School of Public Affairs, The University of Texas at Austin. Retrieved from <https://childandfamilyresearch.utexas.edu/importance-father-involvement>.

11 McLanahan, S., Tach, L., & Schneider, D. (2013). The causal effects of father absence. *Annual Review of Sociology, 39*, 399–427.

12 Nock, S. L., & Einolf, C.J. (2008). *The one hundred billion dollar man: The annual public cost of father absence*. National Fatherhood Initiative. Retrieved from <https://www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/one-hundred-billion-dollar-man-annual-public-costs-father-absence>.

Reports on the Status of Children and Low-Income Families

There are several excellent reports that assess the state of America's families and children for the 50 states and the District of Columbia. They include the Children's Defense Fund's State of America's Children,¹³ the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids County Data Book,¹⁴ the Prenatal-to-3 State Policy Roadmap released by the Prenatal-to-3 Impact Center at the University of Texas at Austin,¹⁵ the Child Trends Opportunity Index,¹⁶ and the Child Trends Adverse Childhood Experiences: National and State-level Prevalence.¹⁷ These reports use a discrete set of indicators to illustrate the standing of the 50 states and the District of Columbia with respect to key economic, educational, health-related, and community factors that are known to create the conditions for child well-being and opportunity. They also serve as examples of the laws, policies, and practices that states can adopt to better serve their residents and help them thrive. With few exceptions (e.g., state minimum wage, family leave policies), however, none of these reports present indicators that pertain to fathers. Table 2 summarizes the key policy areas that each report highlights to illustrate how America's children are doing.

Chapter 1, Table 2. State-by-State Reports on the Status of Children and Low-Income Families

The Children's Defense Fund <i>The State of America's Children: 2021</i>	12 policy areas and with 35 tables for each state dealing with child population, child poverty, income and wealth inequality, housing and homelessness, child hunger and nutrition, child health, early childhood, education, child welfare, youth justice, gun violence, and immigration
The Annie E. Casey Foundation <i>Kids Count Data Book</i>	Four domains and 16 indicators on economic well-being, education, health, family and community
The University of Texas at Austin's Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center <i>State Policy Roadmap 2021</i>	Five effective policies and six effective strategies to strengthen a state's prenatal-to-3 system of care
Child Trends <i>The 2019 Opportunity Index</i>	Four dimensions and 20 indicators to obtain an overall score and grade for all states and the District of Columbia, with dimensions consisting of economy, education, health and community
Child Trends <i>Adverse Childhood Experiences: National and State-Level Prevalence</i>	Measures the prevalence of one or more adverse childhood experiences among children from birth through age 17, as reported by a parent or guardian based on data from the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health which are representative at national and state levels

13 Children's Defense Fund. (2021). *The state of America's children: 2021*. Retrieved from <https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/The-State-of-Americas-Children-2021.pdf>.

14 Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2021). *KIDS COUNT data book: State trends in child well-being*. Retrieved from <https://www.aecf.org/resources/2021-kids-count-data-book>.

15 Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center. (2021). *2021 Prenatal-to-3 state policy roadmap*. Child and Family Research Partnership, LBJ School of Public Affairs, The University of Texas at Austin. Retrieved from <https://pn3policy.org/pn-3-state-policy-roadmap-2021/>

16 Child Trends. (2019). *The 2019 opportunity index*. Retrieved from <http://opportunityindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2019-Opportunity-Index-Briefing-Book.pdf>.

17 Sacks, V., Murphey, D., & Moore, K. A. (2014). *Adverse childhood experiences: National and state-level prevalence*. Child Trends. Retrieved from <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/adverse-childhood-experiences-national-and-state-level-prevalence>.

Reports on the Status of Fathers

There are fewer state-by-state compilations of data on the status of fathers, and they tend to focus on a narrower range of issues and/or only consider fathers who live with their children. For example, in the Best and Worst States for Working Dads, WalletHub compared the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia across four key dimensions using 23 indicators of friendliness toward working fathers.¹⁸ The state rankings are drawn from publicly available data as well as research conducted by WalletHub. Table 3 summarizes the dimensions and indicators that WalletHub used to compare states.

Chapter 1, Table 3. Dimensions and Indicators for WalletHub's Best and Worst States for Working Fathers

Economic and social well-being	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Median family income % working men who are economically secure Unemployment rate for men with children aged 0–17 % children aged 0–17 (with dad present) living in poverty % male high school students who graduate on time
Work-life balance indicator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> % working from home Parental leave policies Average time men spend on child care Average workday hours Average commute time
Child Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State's day care quality score Childcare costs adjusted for median family income Pediatricians per capita Quality of state school system Share of nationally accredited childcare centers Number of childcare workers per children under age 14
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Male uninsured rate Male life expectancy Male suicide rates Male mental health % men report having good or better health on the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) % men report being physically active on the BRFSS Unaffordability of doctor's visits

The National Parents Organization began the *Shared Parenting Report Card* in 2014 and updated it in 2019.¹⁹ It evaluates the 50 states and the District of Columbia on their statutory provisions promoting shared parenting. Each state is assessed on 21 factors of their child custody law and assigned a letter grade ranging from A to F, based on the extent to which they promote shared parenting by establishing a rebuttable presumption in favor of it, even when parents do not agree (with clear exceptions for cases of domestic abuse). Other considerations are the extent to which judges must justify deviations from the presumption and whether false allegations of abuse are discouraged. In 45 states, the statutes address nonmarital children as well as marital

¹⁸ McCann, A. (2021). *Best & worst states for working dads*. WalletHub. Retrieved from <https://wallethub.com/edu/best-and-worst-states-for-working-dads/13458>.

¹⁹ National Parents Organization. (2019). *2019 shared parenting report card*. Retrieved from <https://www.sharedparenting.org/2019-shared-parenting-report>.

children. In 2019, two states received an A grade, seven states and the District of Columbia received a B, 25 states received a C, 15 states received a D, and two states received an F. The Report Card also presents the positives and negatives of each state's statutory provisions. (We present state scores on the Shared Parenting Report Card in our report chapter on Family Law).

Other father-centered policy reports highlight the challenges that fathers face, identify remedial strategies, and feature exemplary practices and policies.

MenCare, a global campaign led by Promundo to achieve family well-being, gender equality, and better health for mothers, fathers, and children, compiled *State of America's Fathers: 2016*.²⁰ It focuses on the gender-based and economic barriers to male engagement in caregiving in the United States and devotes one chapter to the vulnerabilities and inequalities that nonresident and low-income fathers face. The report does not present quantitative information for states or local communities but outlines several developments over the past 50 years that have made the balance of work and family life more challenging for Black and brown fathers. These include 1) the demographic shift in family composition to cohabiting and unmarried families; 2) the rise of nonresident fathers, a trend that is often fueled by high rates of incarceration among young minority men; 3) the growth of the child support enforcement system to help support children in single-parent households; and 4) the destructive impact of high child support obligations that generate arrears and enforcement actions and undermine attachments to families, legitimate employment, and the broader society. No state-by-state patterns are presented.

The Fatherhood Resource Hub of the Child & Family Research Partnership at the University of Texas at Austin highlights father-specific materials and resources in Texas and the nation at large that aim to facilitate father inclusion in the lives of their children and families.²¹ Notable policies, programs, and services for fathers in Texas include a statewide curriculum teaching the realities of parenting for public middle and high schools, father initiatives in the state's prevention and child protective services agencies, efforts to target fathers in education initiatives and family literacy programs, and parenting and coparenting programs for incarcerated fathers. The state's father-friendly child support and child custody policies include the routine inclusion of parenting time plans with new child support orders, a statewide hotline to help noncustodial parents maintain relationships with their children, and an initiative to assist incarcerated noncustodial parents with child support order modification.

In *Centering Child Well-Being in Child Support Policy*, Ascend at the Aspen Institute and the Good+Foundation showcase exemplary state-level policies and programs in the child support arena.²² They take aim at policies that foster the generation of inaccurate child support orders, the generation of unmanageable child support debt, the use of overly aggressive and counterproductive enforcement tools, and the retention by states of child support payments collected for families receiving cash assistance in order to reimburse the cost of cash benefits paid to families. Based on surveys with state child support directors, they highlight innovative approaches to increasing child support payments and present a series of pragmatic and family-centered

20 Heilman, B., Cole, G., Matos, K., Hassink, A., Mincy, R., & Barker, G. (2016). *State of America's fathers: A MenCare advocacy publication*. Promundo-US. Retrieved from <https://promundoglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/State-of-Americas-Fathers-report-June-12-2016.pdf>.

21 Child and Family Research Partnership. (2021). *Fatherhood resource hub*. LBJ School of Public Affairs, The University of Texas at Austin. Retrieved from <https://www.fatherhoodresourcehub.org/>.

22 Ascend at The Aspen Institute and Good+Foundation. (2020). *Centering child well-being in child support policy*. Retrieved from <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/resources/centering-child-well-being-in-child-support-policy/>.

child support policies. Thus, the *Paying Support to Families Child Support Policy Fact Sheet* describes the most robust state pass-through and disregard policies for families currently receiving TANF, as well as the states that have adopted more generous distribution rules for families no longer receiving cash assistance.²³ The *Reducing Arrears Child Support Policy Fact Sheet* features 15 arrears reduction programs in ten states that employ the most robust and innovative child support debt reduction strategies.²⁴

Finally, The Campaign for Black Male Achievement (CBMA) report, *The Promise of Place*, includes a Black Male Achievement (BMA) Index for 50 U.S. cities.²⁵ It scores cities across five indicators of engagement and commitment specific to Black men and boys: 1) demographic mix, as measured by the percent of Black males in the total male population of the city; 2) city-led commitment to Black men and boys, as measured by city leaders creating an initiative designed to improve life outcomes for Black males and boys, city acceptance of the My Brother's Keeper (MBK) Community Challenge, and mayor endorsement of Cities United; 3) CBMA membership, as measured by the number of individual and organizational members of CBMA per 100,000 residents; 4) presence of national initiatives supporting Black men and boys, as measured by local presence of up to eight national initiatives or organizations that focus on Black men and boys and 16 national initiatives or organizations targeting issues impacting Black men and boys; and 5) targeted funding supporting Black men and boys, as measured by dollars allocated to support the BMA field relative to the total city population. In addition, to presenting total city scores on each of these indicators, the report highlights the progress each city has made in their commitment to Black men and boys by comparing changes in each city's total score from 2015 to 2017.



23 Ascend at The Aspen Institute and Good+Foundation. (2020). *Child support policy fact sheet: Paying support to families*. Retrieved from <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/resources/child-support-policy-fact-sheet-paying-support-to-families/>.

24 Ascend at The Aspen Institute and Good+Foundation. (2020). *Child support policy fact sheet: Reducing arrears*. Retrieved from <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/resources/child-support-policy-fact-sheet-reducing-arrears/>.

25 Campaign for Black Male Achievement. (2018). *The promise of place*. Retrieved from <https://storage.googleapis.com/cbma-files/downloads/FINAL-CBMA-POP-18-Report.pdf>.

This Report

This report considers the status of fathers in ten areas of public life: child support, child welfare, criminal justice, early childhood, education, employment, family law, food and housing, health and mental health, and responsible fatherhood. Within each area, we report on a variety of measures of supportive policy and/or programs and services for fathers that were available for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. When measures for fathers were unavailable, we used indicators for adult, non-senior men. In some policy areas (e.g., education), virtually all our examples of supportive policy and programs pertain to undereducated youth and non-senior adults as a whole, since breakdowns on participation and outcome for men versus women were not available.

Unlike previous state-by-state reports on the status of family policies and programs, we focus on those that affect fathers per se and/or men of fathering age. Since father engagement is particularly tenuous for low-income, nonresident fathers, we highlight policies and programs that address their circumstances. Since positive father involvement is unambiguously associated with child well-being, we highlight initiatives that may have the potential to alleviate some of the barriers that many low-income, nonresident fathers face in becoming and remaining involved with their children. While several compilations feature exemplary policies and programs in selected jurisdictions, we concentrate on documenting the status of policy in every state and the District of Columbia.

The report has several purposes. One is to establish a baseline of supportive father policies and programs at the state level against which future change might be assessed. Fathers are typically invisible in programs and policies dealing with children and families and their engagement and retention is ignored and uncounted. One objective of this report is to make father participation more visible and to record where states stand in the process of including them.

A second goal is to highlight the underlying barriers to positive father engagement. While the connections between state policy and father-child contact patterns are obvious in some areas (e.g., shared custody laws and child support adjustments for parenting time), they are less readily appreciated in other areas (e.g., state policies to reduce parole and probation revocations or the treatment of a criminal record in the employment application process).



A third goal of the report is to provide a “roadmap” for states and stakeholders interested in increasing equity and advancing the engagement of low-income, nonresident fathers in the lives of their children. While no state has achieved everything that it could, some states are further along in adopting supportive policies and narrowing racial and economic disparities. This report identifies promising policies, and the states that are furthest along, midway, and behind. It also highlights inconsistencies in state performance across a range of metrics both within and across multiple policy areas. While some measures of engagement are consistent within a policy sector and/or from one policy area to the next, others are not with states excelling in one arena and falling behind in another.

A fourth objective is to stimulate better measurement of father engagement. It is extremely difficult to find indices of state support for fathers that are meaningful and available for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. For any single metric that we include in our compilation, there were five or six others that we did not because of the lack of consistent and reliable data. Each report chapter includes some of the items on our wish list.

Finally, we hope that the report will inspire research on the impact of various state-level policies on the status of fathers, children, and families. State-level policies can play a key role in shaping opportunities and outcomes for fathers and their children. To date, research on the effects of policies on fathers has been limited; research on the effects of father policies at the state-level on children has been nonexistent. Hopefully, this compilation will lead to more investigations of this type.

The report relies on publicly available information from a variety of sources. This includes laws in multiple policy areas that are tracked on the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) website and in multiple NCSL publications; child support policies that are recorded on the Intergovernmental Reference Guide and in State Plans maintained by the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement; Child and Family Services Plans prepared by state departments of children and family services; data maintained by federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (chapter on Health), the Children's Bureau (chapter on Child Welfare), the Department of Labor (chapter on Employment); and publications in specific policy areas released by organizations such as the Collateral Consequences Research Center (chapter on Criminal Justice), CLASP (chapter on Responsible Fatherhood), the National Healthy Start Association (chapter on Early Childhood), and the Education Commission of the States (chapter on Education).

We also did original data collection to identify programs and policies dealing with father engagement. This included conducting a small survey with members of the Children's Trust Fund Alliance; reviewing websites for state agencies in the 50 states and the District of Columbia dealing with corrections, children and family services, education, and health and extracting information on father-supportive programs and policies; contacting state informants by email to update published information; and conducting interviews with experts in some policy areas to identify potential data sources and appropriate indicators.



Conclusions

While more and more fathers have become equal co-parents in recent decades, with consequent benefits for their children's well-being and healthy development, many fathers experience barriers that prevent or limit their involvement in their child's life. All too often, they are low-income, non-White men who have long been the targets of economic and racial marginalization. Father absence is associated with a variety of adverse outcomes for children ranging from health complications among infants to behavioral problems in school-age children and teen pregnancy and school dropout patterns among adolescents. These deficits last well into adulthood, with some studies finding longstanding emotional effects of father absence, including adult depression and relationship difficulty.²⁶ State laws, organizational policies, and programs have the potential to address some of the inequities and barriers that fathers face and facilitate their economic, legal, and social functionality and involvement. This report presents a catalogue of such policies and programs and documents the status of each state and the District of Columbia in adopting them.



²⁶ Osborne, C., Boggs, R., & McKee, B. (2021). *Importance of father involvement*. Child and Family Research Partnership, LBJ School of Public Affairs, The University of Texas at Austin. Retrieved from https://www.fatherhoodresourcehub.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CFRPBrief_B0450821_ImportanceofFatherInvolvement.pdf.

Fatherhood Research & Practice Network

About the FRPN

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To the best of our knowledge, the information we provide is current as of report publication and/or the date indicated in the report and table sources. Nevertheless, since state policies and programs continually evolve, there are inevitable changes and developments that we have not captured. The views expressed in the report are those of the authors.

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