

## NCFR *Report*: How the States Stand on Supportive Policies and Programs for Low-Income and Nonresident Fathers

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# How the States Stand on Supportive Policies and Programs for Low-Income and Nonresident Fathers

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## In Brief

- A unique report provides state-by-state information on supportive father policies and programs in 10 areas of public life.
- Father policies and programs are not routinely tracked and related data, including on racial/ethnic disparities, is unavailable.
- There is limited research on the impact of state policies and programs on father behavior and child outcomes.

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 separation 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. Multiple factors contribute to fathers’ lack of involvement with children, including tenuous and conflictual relationships with the child’s mother, mothers’ and fathers’ formation of new romantic relationships, and parents having children with other 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 (Edin & Nelson, 2013). Despite these challenges, many fathers can stay involved with their children, and when

fathers are positively involved, children have better outcomes, including higher levels of academic achievement, fewer behavior problems, better peer relationships, and increased social-emotional competence (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013; Coates & Phares, 2019; Osborne et al., 2021).

To encourage the adoption of state-level policies and programs that promote positive father engagement, we compiled a new national resource (Pearson & Wildfeuer, 2022). In that publicly available report, we provide information on policies and programs that support the engagement of fathers with their children in the 50 states and the District of Columbia (DC). The report addresses 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. Taken together, the report creates a baseline of supportive father policies and programs against which future change might be assessed; highlights underlying barriers to positive father engagement at the state level; provides examples of supportive policies that interested states might adopt; and identifies needed measures of father status and involvement that are currently unavailable. The report will hopefully also stimulate better measurement of father engagement and inspire research on the impact of state-level policies on the status of fathers, children, and families.

## Methodology

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



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maintained by the federal Office of Child Support Services; 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 and mental 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), the Center for Law and Social Policy (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 collected original data for the report to identify policies and programs specific to 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 DC 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.

## Findings

We found the following patterns in state-level policies and programs across the 10 areas of public life that we examined. The underlying documentation for these patterns is presented in the report (Pearson & Wildfeuer, 2022).

There are few state policies and programs that explicitly target fathers, especially those who are low-income and nonresident. Although low-income, nonresident fathers have the greatest need for support, there are few policies and programs that focus on fathers with exceptions in the areas of child support, family law, and responsible fatherhood. However, there are many state policies and programs that indirectly affect fathers. For example, state minimum wage laws are relevant for all low-income populations.

Many states have not enacted supportive father policies and programs. Just 12 states do automatic criminal record cleaning and only 18 states and DC limit questions about criminal history during application for public and private jobs. Also, when enacted, many supportive policies and programs do not exist at scale. While Healthy Start programs require that each program serve at least 100 fathers or male partners per year, there are only 101 Healthy Start programs located in 34 states and DC.

Long-standing regional patterns that track with state political classification, generosity of safety net programs, and outcomes for women and children are reflected in many policy metrics for low-income fathers. For example, 12 states, mostly southern and western, have harsh policies on at least five of the six child support indicators. Although some states manage to pursue more inclusive policies despite federal limitations, others resist federal opportunities. Only four states and DC have expanded state Earned Income Tax Credits (EITCs) for workers without children and only New York and DC have EITCs for noncustodial parents who pay child support.

Performance measures and targets on father engagement are needed with appropriate incentives and sanctions. There is no federal

requirement, for example, to include or measure father participation in home visiting. Finally, there are new opportunities for states to help low-income fathers and their families due to growing budget surpluses although many have adopted tax cuts in lieu of service expansions. In addition, states can use federal recovery funds through the American Rescue Plan Act, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the Inflation Reduction Act toward low-income housing and job training for underserved populations.

## Implications

Many important measures of father engagement and impact are not tracked by federal and state agencies. For example, we do not know about male—let alone father—participation in alternative high school graduation options, initiatives to improve graduation options, initiatives to improve high school graduation rates, postsecondary opportunities for low-income students, and career and technical education (CTE) programs. Data-gathering efforts could address this omission and generate and report breakdowns on participation and outcome by gender. Additionally, analyses need to examine the extent of disparities because of race and/or ethnicity in the states and policy responses to address these disparities. Programs and agencies must begin to collect data on race and ethnicity for clients and program participants on a routine basis.

Although researchers have been interested in the role of fathers in their children's development for many years (Cabrera et al., 2000) and a recent meta-analysis found that positive father involvement is associated with improved child well-being, including among unmarried, nonresident fathers (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013), research on the effects of state-level policies and programs on father opportunities and behaviors is limited. One exception is the analysis of state laws regarding the information employers can legally consider and the availability of official criminal record information on the employment of fathers with criminal records (Emory et al., 2019). More research is needed that continues to make the connections

between state policies and programs, father behavior, and child outcomes (e.g., Nepomnyaschy et al., 2021).

## Conclusions

State policies and programs can encourage or hinder the role of fathers in their children's lives. We compiled a state-by-state report (Pearson & Wildfeuer, 2022) to highlight supportive father policies and programs, underlying barriers to positive father engagement at the state level, and measures of father status and involvement that are currently unavailable. Although there are reports that assess the state of families and children for the 50 states and DC (e.g., Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023), these rarely present indicators that pertain specifically to fathers. Similarly, state-by-state compilations of data on the status of fathers (e.g., National Parents Organization, 2022) tend to focus on a narrow range of issues (e.g., custody) and/or consider only fathers who live with their children.

Policy and program changes occur regularly, and state-by-state examination needs to be regularly updated. Hopefully, future updates and analysis activities will attract external support so that state efforts and accomplishments in terms of supportive father policies and programs can be monitored and highlighted. \*

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