Fatherhood Research & Practice Network

www.frpn.org

Sampling, Recruitment and Retention

Most research involves recruiting individuals to take part in a new service, keeping the individuals fully engaged and participating, and collecting information from them at specific points in time, such as prior to the start of services, when services end, and some specified number of months after the end of the services. The following are considerations to take into account as you begin to define and work with your selected target population.

Recruitment

Some programs have been funded to provide services to very specific populations, such as noncustodial fathers being released from jails or prisons. These individuals may be ordered to attend an orientation session and participate in the program. In these types of cases, the issue is not so much recruitment as retention (which is discussed below).

Other programs plan to serve a variety of individuals, although they may plan to impose certain restrictions (such as no open child protective services cases, no cases without paternity established, or only cases involving young fathers). For these programs, one of the first questions to address is whether the restrictions that have been put in place will result in a significant reduction in the number of fathers who are eligible to enroll. Exploring this issue at the start will create fewer problems for the research compared to, for example, opening the program up to all noncustodial fathers midway through the study.

If the plan is to serve a variety of noncustodial fathers, the planning phase of the project needs to include consideration of the types of settings in which recruitment would be productive. If there are community centers or job training programs, child support agencies, or other types of places that are likely to see a significant number of noncustodial fathers, the program staff should reach out to see if recruitment is welcome and how it might be most effective.

Recruitment needs to be simple, but it also needs to provide information to the father and collect basic information from him. The father should be informed about the next steps in the process: Is there an intake interview he needs to complete? When will this happen? Does he need to attend an orientation session? When will this happen? Does he have to wait until a group (sometimes called cohort) of

FRPN Co-Director Jay Fagan, PhD | *Professor, Temple University School of Social Work*
Ritter Hall Annex, 5th Floor | Philadelphia, PA 19122 | (215) 204-1288 | jfagan@temple.edu

FRPN Co-Director Jessica Pearson, PhD | *Director, Center for Policy Research*
1570 Emerson Street | Denver, CO 80218 | (303) 837-1555 | jspearson@centerforpolicyresearch.org

FRPN Coordinator Rebecca Kaufman, MSW | *Temple University*
Ritter Hall Annex, 6th Floor | Philadelphia, PA 19122 | (215) 204-5706 | rebecca.kaufman@temple.edu

fathers has been identified before the program begins? If this is the case, it will be helpful to stay in touch with the father on a regular basis to bolster his interest in the program. If the father can join an ongoing class or support group, he should receive full information about when and where this will happen.

While fathers need information about the program, the researcher or program staff also needs to collect some information from the father at the time of enrollment. Information about how to contact the father should be gathered, including email or Facebook accounts. It is also useful to collect this contact information for a person who will likely know where the father is should it prove difficult to contact him. If an interview is scheduled six months post-program, it may be necessary to use these secondary contacts to collect current information on the father. Many researchers find that the father's mother is the best source of secondary contact information. She tends to have stable contact information and knows where her son can be reached over time.

Although contact information is the most obvious type of data to collect at enrollment, gathering a little more information may be helpful down the road. If the father fails to appear for a first interview, all you will only know about him is what is collected at enrollment. If you collect information about his age, the ages of his children, his contact patterns with his children, or other key items, you may gain some useful insights into who continues with the program and who drops out.

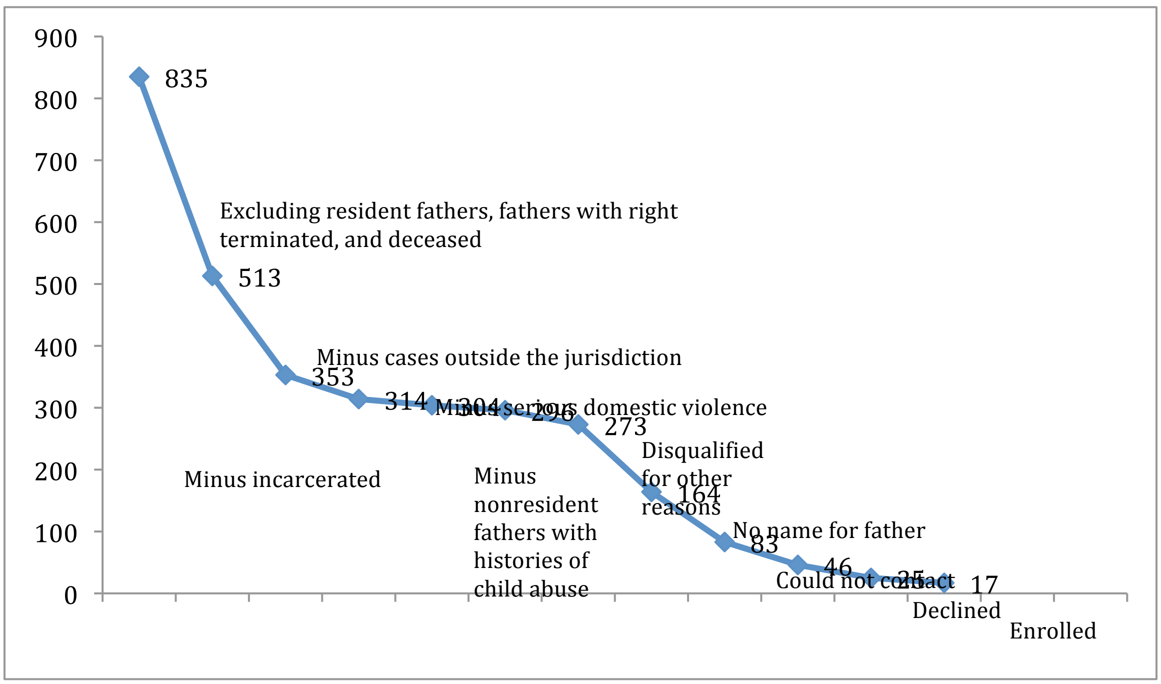
Attrition and Retention

There are many reasons you will want to work to keep fathers engaged in the program once they enroll. Naturally, the program wishes to be seen as strong and productive, characteristics that are undermined by high attrition rates. From the perspective of the evaluation, there are also important reasons to want to minimize dropouts. It will be difficult to determine how well the program works with different types of fathers if there are too few fathers in the evaluation.

In addition, both program staff and evaluators would benefit from knowing why the father left the program. Sometimes it is impossible to know. He simply stops attending and cannot be contacted. If he can be contacted, his responses to a few exit questions may give program and evaluation staff ideas about how to change the program to make it more accommodating. This may mean making changes in the location, helping with transportation, or changing the hour at which the program meets. It may also be that the fathers who dropout do not see the program meeting their needs. Perhaps they see the program as mostly geared to fathers of adolescents, while they are the fathers of young children. These kinds of responses will require the program to think about the target group that is to be served and the recruitment process that is to be used in the future.

In the Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Initiative: COPES Final Evaluation Report, the authors warn that due to attrition, the **positive** outcomes found for the program could be due to retention biases. In other words, participants with more barriers and other specific characteristics might have dropped out of the study at a higher rate than other participants. This study of recently released inmates found that of the 500 individuals who took part in the pre-test, 23 percent dropped out before a post-test.

Taken together, a narrowly defined population to be served, combined with problems with recruitment and attrition, can result in extremely small studies that can only be treated as exploratory in nature. For example, in a 2011 study of a program on fathering for fathers in the child welfare system (an especially difficult group to recruit, engage, and retain), the researchers tracked how 835 potential project participants were eliminated either because they were not relevant (302), ineligible (240), not locatable (291), or declined to participate (25) (Thoennes, Harper, Folaron, Malm, McLaughlin, Bai, & Kaunelis, 2011). As a result, only 17 fathers ultimately enrolled in the program and participated.



Some programs use incentives to keep fathers engaged and returning: providing food or snacks, transportation tokens, or even small cash awards after a certain number of classes are completed. Other programs offer more substantial incentives. For example, a financial literacy program for low-income noncustodial parents in the child support system in Memphis, Tennessee, ultimately succeeded in enrolling more than 1,000 parents by offering to restore driver's licenses to project participants who made small child support payments, looked for a job, and attended a four-hour financial education class.

Finally, if the program includes multiple sessions over a span of time, program staff and evaluators will need to determine how completion of the program should be calculated. If a father attends 10 sessions out of 12, did he "complete" the program? What about six sessions out of 12?

Sample Size

Another reason to be concerned about attrition is that unexpected reductions in sample sizes can affect evaluation plans. If there is a control or comparison group, this group will not experience the same attrition as the treatment group (although they may prove to be equally difficult to reach for any follow-up assessments). As a result, the only way to overcome the bias that may have been created by having certain types of fathers leave the treatment group will be to consider those who complete the program and those who do not as a single group. Although there may be ways to statistically control for the biases in the treatment group relative to the comparison group, this is less than ideal.

Of course, sample size also depends on the type of study being conducted. Qualitative or ethnographic studies tend to examine a relatively small group of individuals in a great deal of depth. Quantitative or outcome studies rely on gathering less information about more cases.

Oftentimes, programs will discover the question "How many cases do I need?" yields a figure that is unrealistic given the population the program draws from and the number of individuals who can be served. As a result, most programs cannot meet the "textbook standard" and instead try to serve as many clients as they can given the allotted time and budget.

Sampling, Recruitment, and Retention Resources

For more information about qualitative research, a good resource is the article "How many cases do I need?" On science and the logic of case selection in field-based research" in the journal *Ethnography* published by Sage Publications (available online at http://www.bebr.ufl.edu/sites/default/files/Small%20M.%20L.%20(2009)%20How%20many%20cases%20do%20I%20need_0.pdf).

For an introduction to sample sizes in quantitative research, a good source is the article "Understanding power and rules of thumb for determining sample sizes," by Carmen R. Wilson VanVoorhis and Betsy L. Morgan, published in *Tutorials in Quantitative Methods for Psychology* (2007), vol. 3(2), pp. 43-50. It is available online at http://www.tqmp.org/Content/vol03-2/p043/p043.pdf.

For more information and for methods of testing for attrition bias information, see *Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Initiative: COPES Final Evaluation Report*. Funded by Administration for

Children and Families, submitted to COPES, Inc., Louisville, KY, and prepared by Pacific Institute for Research & Evaluation Louisville, KY and McGuire & Associates Lewis Center, OH. (April 2011). Also available at http://www.copes.org/docs/FI%20Evaluation%20Report.pdf.

OFA Evaluation Resource Guide for Responsible Fatherhood Programs
http://www.jbassoc.com/reports/documents/rf_evaluation_final_v2-small.pdf

Thoennes, N., C. Harper, G. Folaron, K. Malm, O. McLaughlin, J. Bai, & R. Kaunelis. (2011). Where are the dads? Identifying, locating, contacting, and engaging nonresident fathers of children in foster care. *Protecting Children*, *26*, 2.