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Enhancing the Economic Stability and Parenting Skills of Fathers with Criminal Justice Involvement: Highlights from the Second FRAMING Research Responsible Fatherhood Technical Work Group

Children tend to fare better when fathers are involved in their lives. Numerous studies have shown fathers' emotional and financial involvement enhances children's social, behavioral, and academic outcomes (Adamsons and Johnson 2013; Cabrera et al. 2017; Cancian et al. 2013; Mincy et al. 2016; Haskins and Turney 2018; Yoder et al. 2016). In part for this reason, the federal government has made a long-standing commitment to enhance fathers' parenting and relationship skills and economic stability. Since 2006, Congress has dedicated substantial funding each year for healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) and responsible fatherhood (RF) programming through competitive, multiyear grants administered by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) (U.S. Congress 2010; ACF 2020). OFA also partners with the Office of Planning,

Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within ACF to build the evidence base to strengthen programming (OFA 2019). In 2018, ACF undertook the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project to systematically identify current gaps in the knowledge base for HMRE and RF programming (OPRE n.d.).

Many fathers who participate in RF programming have been or are currently involved in the criminal justice system. For example, data from four RF programs that received funding in the 2011 grant cycle indicated about three-quarters of program participants had been convicted of a crime at some point in their lives (Zaveri et al. 2015). Moreover, some RF programs specifically seek to serve men while they are in prison or jail or shortly after their release (Fontaine et al. 2017). Fathers with



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OPRE Report 2021-165
September 2021

About the FRAMING Research project

This work is part of the FRAMING Research project, sponsored by ACF within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ACF has partnered with Mathematica and its subcontractor Public Strategies to conduct the FRAMING Research study. The project team is gathering and synthesizing information through literature reviews, knowledge mapping, stakeholder meetings, expert consultations, and a series of technical work groups focused on HMRE or RF programming. The project team is also drafting a series of white papers to explore key topics related to HMRE and RF programming that emerge during the course of the project.

criminal justice involvement often face additional barriers to achieving economic stability and being involved in their children's lives—two of the primary objectives of RF programs (LaCoe and Betesh 2019; Poehlmann et al. 2010; Eddy and Burraston 2018). However, there has been limited research on how to strengthen RF programming for these fathers. To address this gap in the evidence base, ACF convened a technical work group (TWG) as part of the FRAMING Research project focused on enhancing the economic stability and parenting skills of fathers with criminal justice involvement. This group represented the second in a series of technical work groups convened by the project to discuss issues related to research on RF programming. In this brief, we describe the meeting and highlight key themes and research priorities identified by the group.



THE SECOND FRAMING RESEARCH RF TECHNICAL WORK GROUP

The second RF technical work group for the FRAMING Research project met in September 2020. Due to travel restrictions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting occurred remotely via video conference. The group included eight researchers and practitioners with expertise related to RF programming and/or fathers with criminal justice involvement (Figure 1). ACF convened the group to gather input on future research related to enhancing the economic stability and parenting skills of fathers who are reentering their communities, have been incarcerated, or have other criminal justice involvement, including arrests and convictions. These topics emerged as important gaps in our understanding of RF programs from the project team's review of relevant literature and discussions with ACF about agency priorities. The brief highlights key points from the meeting; it does not cover all comments made by members of the work group.



ENHANCING THE ECONOMIC STABILITY OF FATHERS WITH CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

For fathers involved with the criminal justice system, economic stability can be difficult to achieve. For example, in 2008, the unemployment rate for people who had been incarcerated was 27 percent, nearly five times higher than the rate for the general U.S. population (Couloute and Kopf 2018). Existing RF programs that aim to improve the economic stability of men with criminal justice involvement typically offer a mix of services. Such services include employment supports, on-the-job experience, case management, and/or mental health treatment (Lacoe and Betesh 2019). However, there is limited information about the types of approaches that have been shown to effectively improve the economic stability of these fathers.

The first part of the technical work group discussion focused on the implementation and impacts of programs designed to improve the economic stability of fathers who have a history of criminal justice involvement. It also considered the challenges these men face in achieving economic stability and strategies for overcoming these challenges. Technical work group members noted the following during this part of the discussion:

- There are several barriers to fathers successfully engaging in economic stability services. Fathers with a history of criminal justice involvement often face trauma and additional challenges as a result of historical and ongoing systemic and pervasive racism, poverty, and incarceration. They also can face mental and physical health problems, as well as challenges related to housing and food insecurity. RF programs might need to help fathers address these barriers before fathers can benefit from services to help them secure and maintain jobs. In addition, research should examine how contextual factors like systemic racism, poverty, and mass incarceration, of Black and Latino men in particular, may influence the likelihood that programs achieve their intended outcomes. Research to date has not focused enough on these critical issues.

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- RF programs cannot always address fathers' complex needs due to restrictions tied to the funding (ACF 2020, p. 74) For example, programs cannot use grant funding to support fathers' mental health or substance abuse treatment. Absent changes in the legislation, programs need to develop strong partnerships with other agencies that can address these needs to help fathers achieve economic stability.
 - Social systems and policies, as well as racial discrimination, can hinder the ability of fathers with criminal justice involvement to improve their economic situations. Policies prevent many of these fathers from accessing food stamps, Medicaid, and student loans. States do not always adjust fathers' child support orders while they are in prison or jail, causing fathers to owe very large amounts after release. Background checks and racial discrimination, particularly against Black and Latino fathers, can prevent them from gaining employment or seeking employment opportunities at all. As a result, RF programs that address only individual behaviors—such as how to write a resume, dress professionally, and interview for a position—might have limited success. Instead, programs should explicitly address these contextual barriers at the community level. For example, RF programs can partner with employers in the community to help ensure criminal background checks do not inappropriately prevent fathers in the program from securing jobs after reentry.
 - RF programs and other programs that deliver economic stability services to fathers in jails and prisons are usually required by their funding to work with fathers when they are close to release. However, this might not be the best time to engage fathers. Funders should consider allowing programs to engage fathers earlier in their sentences to enhance positive relationships within the correctional facility and encourage a focus on rehabilitation and restorative justice throughout fathers' sentences, rather than just at the end. For example, programs can start working with fathers earlier in their sentence to obtain short-term credentials that fathers can then use to obtain a job after release.
 - Existing RF programs and curricula that address fathers' economic stability often do not resonate with Black and Latino fathers. Programs should take care to incorporate lessons that reflect fathers' culture, community, and experiences. In addition, program staff should receive training on how to validate and respect the lived experiences of Black and Latino fathers.



ENHANCING THE PARENTING SKILLS OF FATHERS WITH CRIMINAL JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT

Parental incarceration is associated with a myriad of poor outcomes for children, including depression (Wilbur et al. 2007); behavior problems (Haskins 2015; Craigie et al. 2018); food insecurity (Turney 2015); and material hardship (Schwartz-Soicher et al. 2011). Parenting programs that work with fathers in prison or jail might mitigate some of the negative impacts of incarceration on children by supporting fathers' engagement with their children during their sentences. Some programs also continue to work with fathers in community settings after their release. Programs often include a mix of services, such as parent-child visitation, mentoring, counseling, peer support groups, and/or parent education (Bednarowski 2019).

The second part of the technical work group discussion focused on the barriers justice-involved fathers face in trying to be involved parents and, when possible, how programs can help fathers overcome these barriers. Technical work group members offered several suggestions during this part of the discussion:

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- Fathers can be involved with the criminal justice system in different ways. For example, a father might have been arrested earlier in life but not served any time, whereas another father might be recently released on parole. It is important for RF programs to distinguish among different types of criminal justice involvement because they have different implications for fathers' relationships with their children.
 - Incarcerated fathers often cannot access services available to mothers to support parenting. For example, in certain states, mothers serving a relatively short sentence can sometimes keep their babies with them in prison, but this is not the case for fathers. Minimizing or restricting a father's role as a parent during incarceration will likely make it difficult for fathers to connect with their children after release. This likely disproportionately harms relationships between Black and Latino fathers and their children because these fathers are much more likely to experience incarceration than White fathers.
 - Many fathers with criminal justice involvement are interested in learning parenting skills but might not have the bandwidth to focus on this because of other pressing needs. Programs should be prepared to address fathers' other issues, such as food insecurity, lack of stable housing or employment, and physical and mental health problems, to better support fathers' parenting skills.
 - Fathers who participate in RF services may or may not have regular contact with their children. This is true for fathers who participate in programming in prison or jail and for fathers in the community. To be effective, programs need to find ways to help fathers practice and apply the parenting skills taught in the programs. One way programs can do this is by inviting children to participate in some of the sessions. Programs can also help fathers write letters or create videos for their children.
 - Programs that operate in prisons and jails should be cognizant of whether the environment is family friendly. They should note issues with transportation to and from the facility, restrictions about what visitors can wear, the demeanor of corrections staff, and the physical space in which visits occur. To the extent possible, programs should facilitate conversations with incarcerated fathers and their families about their concerns and discuss possible solutions with the correctional facilities.



FUTURE RF RESEARCH PRIORITIES

The project team held a brainstorming session with technical work group members about priority research questions and evaluation ideas related to RF programming for fathers with criminal justice involvement. The technical work group members met in small groups to develop ideas. They then shared the ideas with the full group to develop a set of top priorities. Four top priorities emerged from this discussion.

Broaden the evidence base by conducting studies within a range of communities using diverse research teams

Most evidence-based curricula have not been evaluated with the racially and geographically diverse populations of fathers who participate in RF programming. TWG members noted prior evaluations have focused primarily on curricula delivered to White or Black fathers in urban areas. RF programs are required to use evidence-based or evidence-informed curricula as a condition of their federal funding, but programs

that serve fathers from other racial and ethnic backgrounds or rural fathers often feel the curricula do not address the needs of fathers they serve. Consequently, the field should prioritize formative and impact studies of programs implementing promising practices tailored to these additional communities. For example, programs for Latino men often emphasize the role of extended kin networks and spirituality in supporting fathers' mental health and coping behaviors. These practices are replicable and may be effective for improving outcomes, but they require further study. Such studies should also take care to select outcomes that are relevant and meaningful to the communities, cultures, races, and ethnicities served by the program.

In addition, the researchers conducting these studies should reflect the diversity of program participants in terms of their race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender identity, or other key characteristics. Understanding participants' background and needs is important for developing research questions that identify appropriate outcomes and are relevant to the community. Having a diverse team of researchers is also important for broadening how researchers interpret study data, disseminate findings, and think about program and policy implications.

Explicitly address the lived experiences that matter for fathers' outcomes—particularly Black and Latino fathers

RF programs tend to focus on how individual-level behaviors, such as writing a resume, affect individual-level outcomes, such as finding a job. This focus ignores important contextual factors and lived experiences that also play a role in fathers' economic and parenting outcomes, including systemic racism, historical trauma, implicit and explicit biases against justice-involved fathers, or safety and policing in fathers' neighborhoods. Interventions may be more effective if they prepare fathers with criminal justice involvement to address these types of issues after release. For example, TWG members noted that it is common in Black families to discuss with children how to behave if they are stopped by the police. RF programs—which commonly provide education on explaining things to children in an age-appropriate way—could tackle this larger contextual issue by preparing fathers to have productive, age-appropriate conversations with their children about how race can affect society's views of and assumptions about them, and about how society expects them to interact with institutions such as law enforcement. Evaluations of RF programs should also examine how contextual and cultural factors influence both program delivery and fathers' outcomes. As a first step, evaluators and program staff should work together to collect data, such as through focus groups and intake assessments, to help identify the broader, contextual factors that shape fathers' lives.

Distinguish among different groups of justice-involved fathers

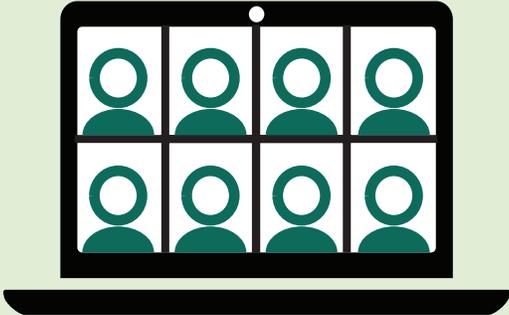
Criminal justice involvement can mean many different things. Some fathers who participate in RF programs might be incarcerated on felony charges; others might have been arrested years ago without serving any time in jail or prison. Moreover, some fathers might not have a criminal history themselves, but the criminal justice system could still affect them via family members or friends. Instead of including all fathers with criminal-justice involvement in a single group, research studies should distinguish among types of justice-involved fathers to better understand how these distinct categories matter for fathers' outcomes. This approach will provide the RF field with a clearer picture of who participates in services

and how different types of criminal justice involvement influence the barriers fathers face in achieving their economic stability and parenting goals.

Evaluate the importance of partnering with agencies and organizations that can provide complementary services

Some RF programs partner with other agencies and organizations to provide important services to fathers that are beyond the scope of RF programming. For instance, programs might refer fathers with signs of depression or substance abuse to mental and behavioral health providers, or they might partner with employers in the community to help fathers transition from prison to the traditional workforce. These types of partnerships can be critical for getting fathers the help they need to improve their economic situation and relationships with their children. Future research studies should aim to identify the factors that contribute to successful partnerships and evaluate whether these partnerships matter for fathers' outcomes.

Figure 1. FRAMING Research RF technical work group members



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Additional FRAMING Research Technical Work Group Meetings

In September 2020, the FRAMING Research project convened another technical work group focused on research priorities concerning HMRE programming for youth and individual adults. A separate brief summarizes the themes from that meeting (Alamillo and Ouellette 2021). The FRAMING Research project also hosted HMRE and RF technical work groups in 2019. Two additional briefs summarize the themes from those meetings (Alamillo and Ouellette 2021; Wood 2020).

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