

# REACHING THEIR FULL



AUGUST 2020

STRATEGIES FOR  
SUPPORTING  
YOUNG FATHERS  
OF COLOR



## MY PERSONAL STORY

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I recall when at age 21, I became a young father unsure and fearful of the parenting journey ahead, but having a sincere desire to be a good dad.

America is in a unique historical moment with the potential for dramatic and sustainable changes. In many ways, we don't know what lies ahead. As I think of this time, I recall when at age 21, I became a young father unsure and fearful of the parenting journey ahead but having a sincere desire to be a good dad. Despite my involvement with the criminal justice system, addiction to heroin and distant relationship with my own father, I wanted to be a good dad to my kids. What was missing was a positive support system that I could lean on and be vulnerable with as my parenting journey was unfolding.

Without the personal agency to pull myself out of a seemingly hopeless situation fueled by a series of poor choices, I struggled for years until I was able to find sobriety, stability and a reconnection to my son. I was fortunate to find access to drug treatment. I developed a new social network, went back to school and reunited with my family. Inspired by, but not defined by that experience, I made a commitment to help at least one other young father realize his potential and desire to be a good dad. I am honored to be a member of the fatherhood practice community and lead a nonprofit dedicated to addressing the social and economic needs of fathers and families.

I am pleased that our organization, the Center for Urban Families, was able to collaborate with the Annie E. Casey Foundation and other fatherhood practitioners on the project described in this report. This collaboration allowed us all to explore the different approaches we each use and to then come together to share our work. This work has lifted up ways we can better meet the needs of young fathers ages 18 to 24—young fathers who are on a journey just as I once was. I am confident they will benefit from the work and experiences of these practitioners who serve young dads as presented in this report.

Sincerely,



**Joseph Jones**  
Founder/President/CEO

# INTRODUCTION

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Acknowledging  
where we are  
now, and where  
we need to be.

The nation is in the midst of massive social upheaval wrought by a global pandemic, the resulting economic downturn, and nationwide protests over police brutality. COVID-19 shuttered the nation, drying up jobs, throwing millions out of work. And at the same time, the deaths of George Floyd and other Black people at the hands of police have sparked a national reckoning over racial injustice and how that plays out in public policy. The coronavirus has exacerbated inequities already built into American systems, disparities around race and class and access to opportunities. And young fathers, particularly Black and Latinx fathers, have been disproportionately impacted. Their communities have been hit hard by COVID-19.

But even before the pandemic, these young fathers were facing significant challenges accessing employment and job loss. They were struggling with housing insecurity. They were more likely to be targeted by law enforcement—and more likely to become victims of police brutality. Some were involved with gangs. Many have yet to finish high school. Some have battled substance abuse and mental health challenges, as they deal with the fallout from trauma. What’s more, their family lives are often quite complex. But until recently, the needs of young fathers, and young parents in general, were all but ignored by researchers, policymakers and practitioners, despite the fact that roughly one million young men ages 18 to 24 are parenting.

Young fathers are grappling with significant difficulties, as they stand at a developmental crossroads. They’re transitioning from childhood to adulthood, while they’re raising their own children. Neuroscience shows that the brains of young adults are still developing and maturing cognitively, which means that young fathers have tremendous potential to grow and change despite early missteps. That’s good news, because these young fathers of color take their parental responsibilities seriously. They want to be good fathers—and they want to give their children the childhoods they themselves never knew. They’re eager. They’re dedicated. They’re resilient. And they need help identifying and taking advantage of opportunities to secure their futures and that of their children.

“[Young fathers] need help identifying...opportunities...”

## BACKGROUND

In Spring 2020, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Center for Urban Families hosted a two-part roundtable with ten youth-serving organizations that conduct outreach and provide services, including job training, parenting, life skills and mental health support to young fathers. Participating organizations hail from both urban and rural communities, and range from mature, high-scale and well-known to small-scale and small-budget. Most are led by men of color and some are led by women of color.

“...[Our] young fathers...they’re resilient...They got a lot going on. But they are...so present in the lives of their children.”

This brief illustrates the creative and exciting approaches the practitioners developed to serve young fathers of color. It also highlights opportunities to strengthen and improve services to young men

who are parenting. These are best practices identified by the organizations who are actively involved in this work on a daily basis—and where they see opportunities to improve on this essential work.

## KEY FINDINGS

### COURTING YOUNG FATHERS

The practitioners have learned that more than anything, creating a meaningful rapport is the key to engaging young fathers. That means hiring empathic and relatable staff, often recruiting people with similar life experiences directly from the community. The goal is to demonstrate support and caring—even if that means taking an untraditional approach.

Practitioners work around the clock to recruit young fathers through street outreach. That can mean chatting them up on street corners or even showing up at bars or strip clubs to pass out fliers. One service provider drives around in a “DAD Van,” a 16-passenger

“We gave up, a long time ago, with the traditional approaches to recruitment...we started knocking on people’s doors.”

stay in the program, such as gift cards, bus fare, or help buying work-appropriate clothes or baby items. Others provide on-site childcare.

van festooned with images of a young Black father holding his baby. They address urgent needs first, such as helping youth obtain stable housing. Or they give participants financial incentives to

### SERVING THE NEEDS OF YOUNG FATHERS OF COLOR

The majority of programs we interviewed focus on serving young fathers of color, particularly African American and Latinx fathers. However, the vast majority of the young men enrolled in their programs are Black.

“We have guys who... haven’t eaten, and, so, we provide food vouchers...or... snacks. These are ...issues that could get in their way of completing the program.”

because they live in a mixed-status family—or they may fear being deported themselves. The solutions needed to support these young fathers should be tailored to their unique backgrounds, culture and circumstances. For example, traditional workforce programs do not work for young fathers with immigration issues. The organizations consulted for this study felt there’s a notable gap in programming for this population. They want to deepen their understanding of young Latinx fathers so they can serve them more effectively.

Still, program designers acknowledge that young Latinx fathers have their own unique challenges. They may be struggling with language barriers. They might have a hard time relating culturally to staff. They may be afraid to get help



Both Black and Latinx young fathers are often the victims of systemic biases, demonized by law enforcement and subject to racial discrimination at every level of the criminal justice system and are more likely to suffer the collateral consequences of a criminal record.

**“Both Black and Latinx young fathers are often the victims of systemic biases, demonized by law enforcement and subject to racial discrimination at every level of the criminal justice system.”**

Because so many young fathers have been caught up in the criminal justice system, they often struggle to provide for their kids. Or they may be separated from them. If they have parole

limitations or are confined to their homes with ankle monitoring bracelets, they may not be able to spend as much time with their children as they’d like. This may impact their eligibility for services as well. Some service providers are addressing these issues by offering legal services for them. In some instances, advocates can help them navigate family court or the intricacies of the often-punitive child support system.

Most of the programs are cohort-based, combining classes on parenting, relationship and financial stability into one curriculum. And they rely heavily on mentors, typically older fathers, to coach them through the challenges of parenthood.

Again, parenthood isn’t their only challenge. Young fathers live complex lives. They’re often in the thick of resolving these issues, which means they may have to exit the programs temporarily. Still, while they’re juggling a lot in their lives, they usually want to rejoin at a later time. Practitioners stress the importance of maintaining communication, reaching out and establishing trust so that young men feel comfortable returning to the program—even if it’s a year or so later. Social media groups allow young fathers to remain in contact with their peers and hold each

other accountable, particularly around attendance. An open-door policy is essential. “It’s never [about] kicking anyone out,” said one practitioner. “If folks stop showing up, we know they’re still in our target population and we’ll resume our intense follow-up.”

## STRENGTHENING FAMILY BONDS

Service providers believe strongly in helping young fathers nurture strong family bonds. Those bonds are essential so young men can play an active role in the lives of their children. All service providers we talked to take advantage of activities to help young fathers nourish their relationships with their children.

**“To see [young fathers] graduate... it’s such a beautiful moment...their whole family is there to celebrate them.”**

That can mean father-daughter parties or kids’ photo days. Or it can mean back-to-school shopping expeditions where fathers receive gift cards provided by charitable organizations to buy

their kids clothing and supplies. And they use social media platforms, such as Instagram, to showcase images of young fathers of color hanging out with their kids, visually reinforcing the notion that they matter as fathers and that this is a safe place to learn and grow into that role.

Successful fatherhood programs recognize that these young men live complex lives. They’re often estranged from their children’s mothers, and in addition to figuring out how to co-parent, they also have to navigate intricate family situations. Some programs, such as Fathers New Mexico, teach young fathers how to positively engage with both the mothers of their children, as well as maternal grandparents who may be co-parenting with them. They even help young fathers create mini scripts when talking through tough situations with co-parents.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite limited resources, these service providers have developed promising practices. And at the same time, because practitioners are making do on tight budgets, they're often not equipped to meet all the needs of the young fathers. The success of the programs, and the ultimate success of the young men and their families, is limited because of the systemic challenges the organizations face. So, to continue doing this laudable work, these practitioners need support, too. The practitioners agreed that the following actions should be taken to strengthen their program models and the long-term trajectory of all young fathers.

## 1. PEER CONNECTIONS

Peer Connections with other fatherhood practitioners to discuss challenges, innovate, and expand service capability. Several groups have partnered with larger fatherhood networks; they'd like to strengthen those partnerships, though they were sometimes frustrated because those mainstream organizations are often tailored for older, white fathers.

"I think at times... It definitely can be stressful, without the resources [educational and financial resources]. The work can get lonely."

of the unique needs of young fathers, from young adult brain development to culturally competent programming and curricula. They'd like to see fatherhood initiatives included in workforce and job training networks and networks that focus on boys and young men of color. That way, these organizations will be better equipped to reach more youth and steer them through the tricky terrain of young fatherhood.

Many smaller organizations that reach or target this population; however, lack the resources to tap into these networks or attend conferences and workshops. What's more, there needs to be an understanding

## 2. INCREASED PUBLIC FUNDING

Increased public funding at the federal, state and local levels. The needs of young families often outweigh the resources of existing models. Practitioners want to intensify and expand services to young fathers, primarily around mental health counseling and legal assistance. Funding—particularly public—should be flexible and allow for activities that support the basic needs of young fathers such as food, back-to-school shopping excursions, transportation or childcare. These activities incentivize program enrollment, participation and retention.

Private funding tends to be more flexible, although it can be restrictive and short-lived as well. For example, few foundations have a special focus on fathers. And few practitioners have received grants to fund young fatherhood programs. More funding from philanthropic foundations would be a boon for fatherhood initiatives. There is also a need for funding to assist young fathers with access and visitation issues, especially when relationships with the mothers of their children end on a sour note.

Over all, with both public and philanthropic funding, two-generation strategies could better serve this population. And funders who support work centered around opportunity and well-being for young men of color should be more attentive to the needs of young fathers who too often are ill-served. Funding is needed to scale promising practices across these sectors.

## 3. RESEARCH

Research to build evidence-based program models. "Fatherhood comes from the field," as one practitioner said. Most models were developed based on the practitioner's own experiences as a young father. Practitioners then spent years refining their practices and tailoring existing curricula to fit this demographic. Program evaluation is needed to demonstrate and boost the effectiveness of this innovative work. Service providers readily

“The field of philanthropy will continue to close us out if we don’t develop data and curriculum around what we do.”

acknowledged gaps in their models, particularly around curriculum. As an example, mainstream models commonly define co-parenting as the relationship between the biological father and mother. But many young

fathers of color have complex familial relationships that include multiple people in the parenting role, including new partners, grandparents and extended family. Research should take these complexities into account. “Evaluation and research are the future of fatherhood programing,” says one practitioner. “The field of philanthropy will continue to close us out if we don’t develop data and curriculum around what we do.”

## 4. SYSTEMS REFORM

Institutional racism, gender role expectations and stigma negatively affect policies and systems that are supposed to serve young families, including fathers. Family court judges, for example, often hit young fathers, who are often unemployed or severely underemployed, with child support payments they cannot afford. Child support obligations can continue even if a young father is incarcerated and unable to work, which means debts pile up, creating an insurmountable financial burden.

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) helps to lift millions of low-income households out of poverty. Yet the current law excludes noncustodial parents. Expanding the EITC to include noncustodial parents who pay child support would help stabilize families and contribute to the child’s well-being.

Some policies intended to help young families can also have unintended consequences, particularly when the father is present in the home. For example, while most home visiting programs target first time parents who are low-income, they tend to focus on the mother and largely ignore fathers. And while two-parent households are eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), many young

families believe they are not eligible and do not apply. What’s more, young families often feel demeaned by their experiences with TANF staffers, who often have misperceptions about the father’s ability to financially support his family.<sup>1</sup> A systematic analysis of policies that affect young families, particularly young men of color who are parenting, is needed to understand the full depth of their needs.

<sup>1</sup> Hahn, Heather, Linda Giannarelli, David Kassabian, and Eleanor Pratt. (2016). Assisting Two-Parent Families through TANF. OPRE Report #2016-56, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## CONCLUSION

As a nation, we’re facing an unprecedented moment. Both COVID-19 and the push for racial justice are forcing a reckoning over centuries-old disparities built into every sector of society. Young fathers of color are disproportionately impacted by these inequities. Before the pandemic, they grappled with policies that all too often are stacked against them, from overly punitive child support enforcement to a lack of educational opportunities to housing instability to the troubled criminal justice system. The economic downturn wrought by the pandemic has multiplied those challenges.

“Both the global pandemic and protests demanding racial justice present an untapped opportunity to build an equitable society...”

Despite this, there is reason for hope. Young men who are parenting feel both a sense of pride and responsibility for their children. They’re highly motivated to improve their lives and that of their kids. A small cohort of practitioners have cracked the code for how

to serve—and engage—young dads. Both the global pandemic and protests demanding racial justice present an untapped opportunity to build an equitable society, one where we fully fund social services tailored for those most in need.

## MINI PROFILES

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### ALL IN

At the Center for Urban Families (CFUF) in Baltimore, Maryland, the motto is “ALL In.” For more than 20 years, CFUF has worked with the community to create a comprehensive approach to promoting social and economic opportunities, while advocating for equity and racial justice in public policy. CFUF rebranded its longstanding fatherhood programming in 2015 as the Baltimore Responsible Fatherhood Project (BRFP). BRFP is a federally funded, 30-day program that helps young fathers ages 18 and older, become more emotionally and financially involved in the lives of their children. (Moms are welcome, too.) The young fathers, many who have been involved in the criminal justice system, receive help with managing everything from custody arrangements to child support obligations to employment readiness. Everything is done through the lens of understanding the full responsibilities of parenting and building healthier relationships with their children. Intensive

case management is essential, says program manager Vernon Wallace, “because that’s where you help these individuals move their needle forward.” CFUF also works with young fathers to complete STRIVE Baltimore, a three-week workforce training workshop for individuals (both young men and young women) ages 18 and older. STRIVE helps members, which is the term we use for the individuals we serve, develop the skills and workplace behaviors required to secure and maintain employment. STRIVE’s unique attitudinal approach fosters personal development to transition into employment by incorporating cognitive instructional techniques like role-playing, workplace simulations, individual and team assignments, Kahoot! learning exercises, seminars, group discussions, videos, and lectures. The STRIVE Baltimore curriculum covers essential components, including soft-skills training, basic computer literacy, job readiness, career development, customer service, and civics.

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### YOU CAN KEEP THE BABIES ALIVE

Brothers United—a project of Pathway Inc., a community action agency in Toledo, Ohio—works in some of the toughest neighborhoods. Gangs are a rite of passage. Young men are expected to sell drugs to contribute to their families. Violence is expected. So, Brothers United case managers often camp out in the back of courtrooms. And they wait. In short order, the presiding judge announces, “Is anyone a father? Brothers United is in the back. Go see them and come back and talk to me.” Other times, they recruit potential candidates on street corners or by hitting up strip clubs. They don’t have a hard time convincing young fathers to join them, says Avis Files, director of Family and Supportive Services. They might have to be told to leave drugs and guns at home, but, “they want to be good fathers,” Files says. Infant mortality is disproportionately high in this predominantly African American community. Through its Healthy Start program, which operates under the federal

Health Resources and Services Administration, Brothers United works to eliminate those disparities by supporting young fathers before, during and after the birth of their children to help improve maternal and infant health. Coaches encourage fathers to participate in family planning, attend doctor’s appointments, sign the birth certificate and learn how to support the mother. Another program assigns a male managed care worker to teach young fathers the basics of maternal and child health, from breast feeding to safe sleep practices. “If you engage the fathers, you can keep the babies alive,” Files says.



## FELONY STREET LAW

The Dovetail Project gives young Black and Latino fathers ages 17–24 in Chicago the skills and support they need to be great fathers for their children and great men in their communities. Founded and run by Black fathers who come from the city they serve, the Dovetail Project is one of the premier fatherhood initiatives in the country and the first to develop a culturally competent curriculum for young fathers of color. Ten years ago, the first class of just 9 students graduated from the Third District Police Station. Since then, over 500 young men have graduated from the organization’s signature program teaching life skills, job skills, and felony street law, helping fathers to maintain an active and engaged presence in their children’s lives. Participants earn a stipend for program completion; receive connections to opportunities to complete their GED, obtain a job, and/or learn a trade; and are honored with a graduation ceremony. Case managers provide one-

on-one holistic support to fathers during their time in the program, and after graduation, graduates join Dovetail’s alumni network of hundreds of young fathers across the city supporting and encouraging each other on their fatherhood journeys. While Dovetail’s in-person programming is temporarily suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization has pivoted to community resource distribution through its Fatherhood Relief Fund, providing essentials such as diapers, wipes, baby formula, and food as well as downloadable resource guides, reaching over 3,000 families so far and counting.

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