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An Overview of Social Characteristics of African American Fathers Connected to Families Receiving TANF Benefits

TANF RESEARCH BRIEF

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Introduction

Paternal engagement has many positive benefits for children's development, and research substantiates the unique role of fathers in contributing to the emotional, academic, and physical well-being of their children (*Allport et al., 2018; Cabrera & Shannon, 2007; Xiong et al., 2021*). Understanding the social characteristics of African American fathers connected to families who receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) provides insight on their lived experiences, social context, and ability to make meaningful contributions to the lives of their children. Furthermore, it also provides insight on the complexities of these families and their multisystem involvement that may extend to other governmental agencies and systems. Understanding the unique characteristics and lived experiences of all parental parties connected to families receiving TANF support is critical for creating effective methods for lifting African American families out of poverty.

According to data from the Office of Family Assistance (2021), most families receiving TANF (85%) are headed by single mothers, which means that many of these children may be connected to a nonresidential father. Recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2022) indicated that 25% of children—11.4 million—do not reside with a biological, step, or adoptive father. However, residential status is not synonymous with paternal engagement, and this research brief also provides an overview of practical ways in which nonresidential African American fathers are engaging with their children. Our inquiry explores the following three domains of father involvement that were conceptualized by Pleck and colleagues (1987): 1) engagement (direct interaction with the child), 2) availability, and 3) responsibility (ensuring that the child's needs are met by providing the needed resources). In consideration of the responsibility element of father involvement, the current brief highlights child support. However, paternal engagement is the focus of father involvement examined in this brief.

On the national level, there is currently no standardized method for assessing the basic demographic characteristics of families receiving TANF, and this is especially true for fathers connected to families receiving TANF. To address this shortcoming, this brief uses data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). The FFCWS is an optimal dataset to use for the purposes of this research brief due to the original focus of the study on the conditions and capabilities of unmarried parents—especially fathers—the impact of welfare reform on families and children, and the nature of the relationship between unmarried parents (*Reichman et al., 2001*). Overall, the current research brief sheds light on demographic and social characteristics of African American fathers connected to families receiving TANF support. An ecological perspective that highlights the importance of understanding individual and contextual factors that drive familial outcomes will also be used to help frame the line of inquiry for the current research brief.



Methods

We analyzed secondary data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), an ongoing, nationally representative, longitudinal study of a birth cohort of 4,898 families that began in 1998. Families were recruited from 75 hospitals in 20 cities throughout the United States with a population of at least 200,000 persons (*Reichman et al., 2007*). Families were contacted at the time of birth of their child, termed the “focal child.” During the initial years of the FFCWS, it was particularly focused on understanding the capabilities of unmarried fathers, relationship dynamics of unmarried parents, child outcomes in higher-risk families, and the influence of public policy and environmental structures on familial and child outcomes when the study began over 20 years ago. These data served as an optimal sample for the current research brief due to the focus of the FFCWS on unmarried parents and paternal engagement.

Inclusion Criteria. The main inclusion criterion for the current analytic sample was race, in which only African American fathers were included. Furthermore, receipt of TANF support within the past year reported by mothers in the study was an additional inclusion criterion, and the fifth wave of data from the FFCWS dataset were included for the current study. The fifth wave of the study was the most current wave available to the public that included data from fathers and mothers, which were collected between 2007–2010. The current analytic sample consisted of 224 African American fathers.

Analytic Strategy. Univariate and bivariate statistics were analyzed for each of the variables of interest. A multiple linear regression was conducted to predict the impact of resource-related and relational-related sociodemographic variables on child support payments (responsibility). Other concerns about TANF’s sufficiency arise from the program’s decentralized nature, which allows states considerable discretion in determining eligibility rules and designing program structures. This results in significant cross-state variation, as states have the authority to implement different policies regarding financing, rulemaking, and administration. Such decentralization often leads to the creation of more restrictive and punitive TANF policies and programs, particularly in the South. These states frequently impose stricter sanctioning policies, family caps, low benefit levels, and program time limits, in addition to eligibility rules like drug testing and felony drug bans. Scholars have pointed out that this state-level discretion can unfairly exacerbate judgment differences, with policies often reflecting underlying imbalances. As a result of strict eligibility rules, TANF assistance reaches fewer families in the South.



Key Findings

Father Involvement

Paternal Engagement

Fathers reported relatively high levels of paternal engagement. Sixty-two percent of the fathers reported being actively engaged with their children in activities at least once per week. More specifically, 44% of fathers reported making sure their children completed homework every day, and 49% talked with their child about his/her day every day.

Figure 1. Paternal engagement in activities with their child.

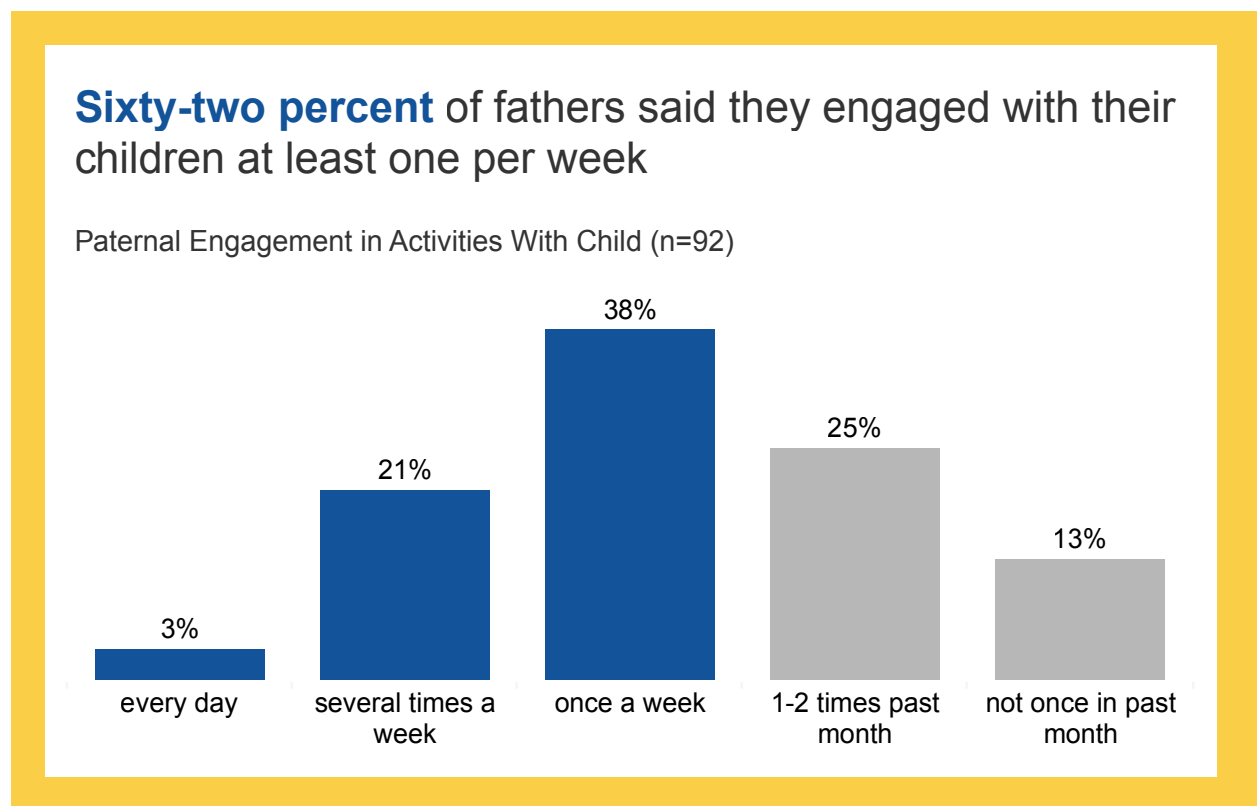




Figure 2. Frequency fathers check to ensure child completed homework.

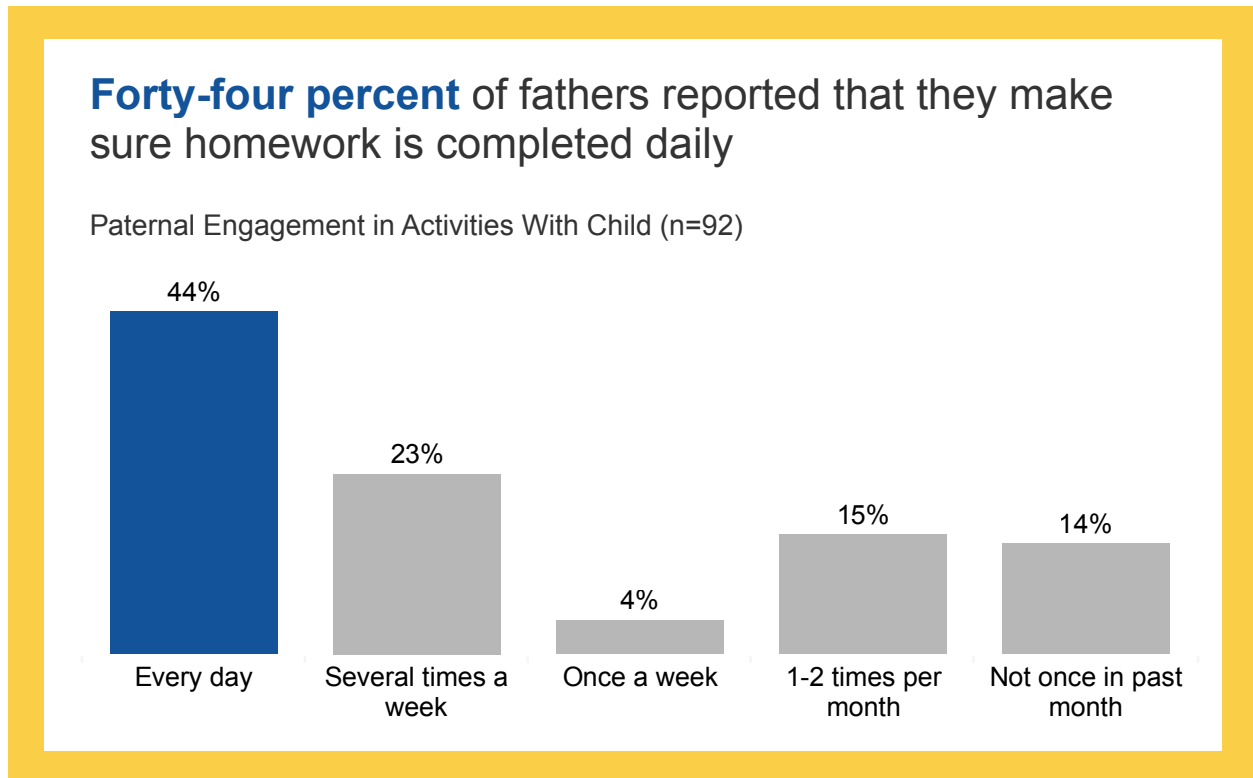
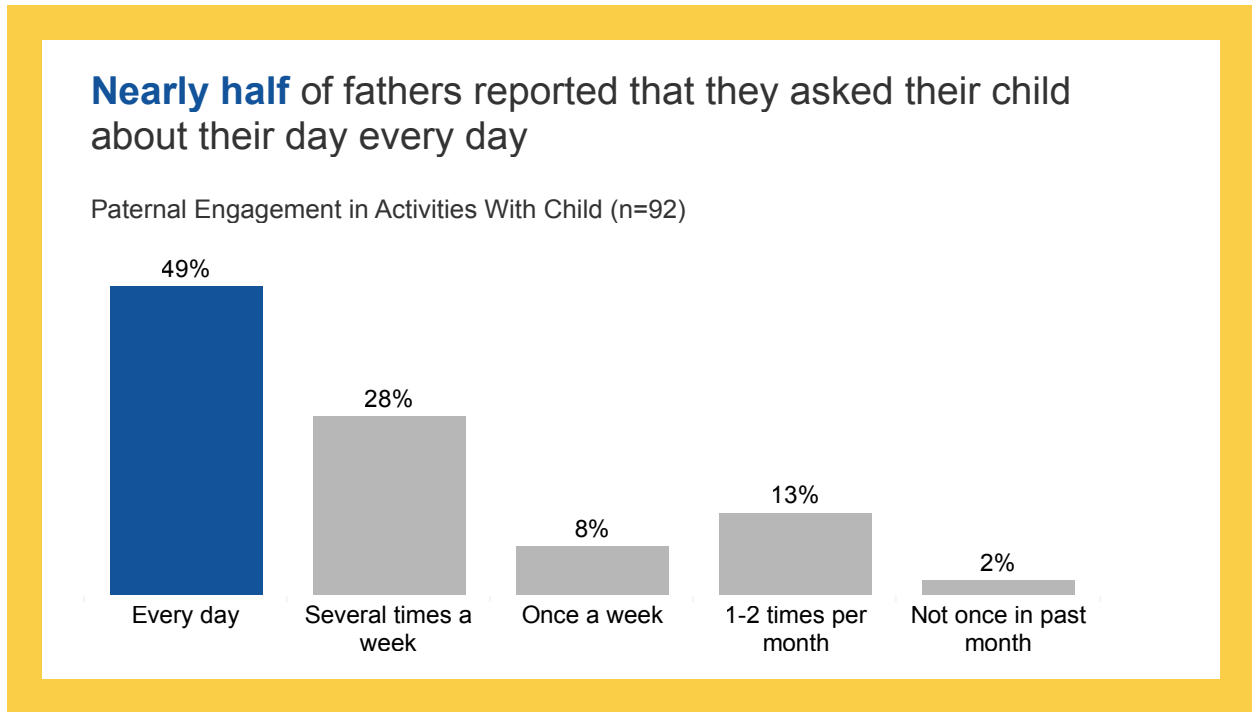




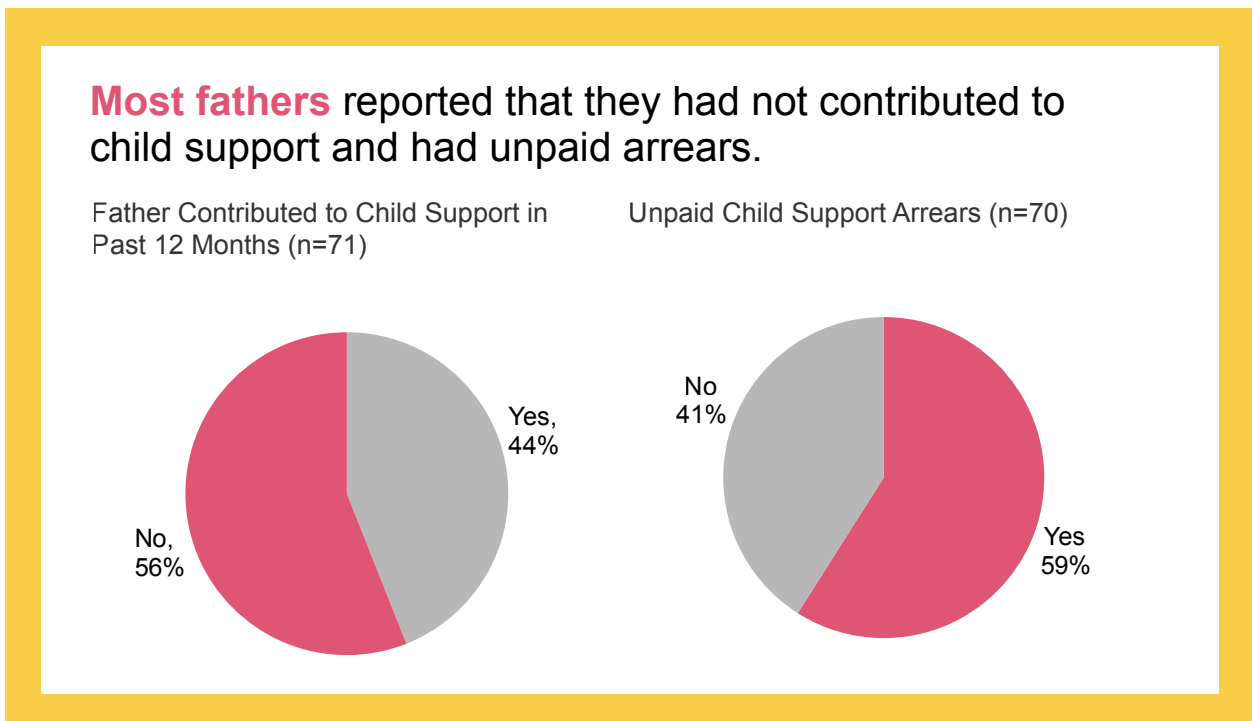
Figure 3. Frequency fathers speak to their child about his/her day.



Paternal Responsibility

Most fathers (56%) had not contributed to child support in the past 12 months. The remaining percentage of fathers (44%) did make a child support payment in the past 12 months.

Figure 4. Father contributed to child support in past 12 months.





Unpaid Arrears

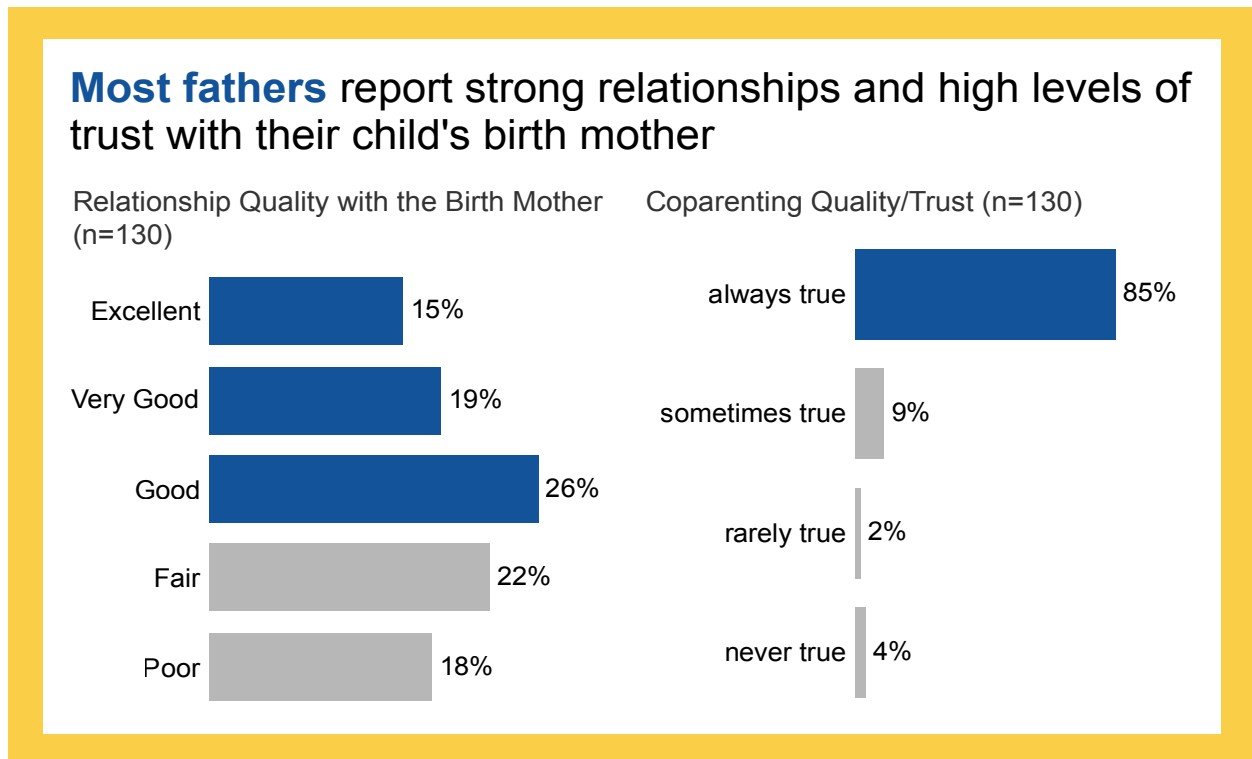
Most fathers (59%) in the sample had unpaid child support arrears, and 41% did not.

Relationship With Birth Mother

Relationship Quality with Birth Mother and Coparenting Quality/Trust

Relationship quality with the birth mother was relatively high for most of the fathers. Sixty percent reported a good-to-excellent relationship with the birth mother. Most fathers (85%) reported high levels of coparenting quality/trust with the birth mother.

Figure 5. Relationship quality with birth mother.



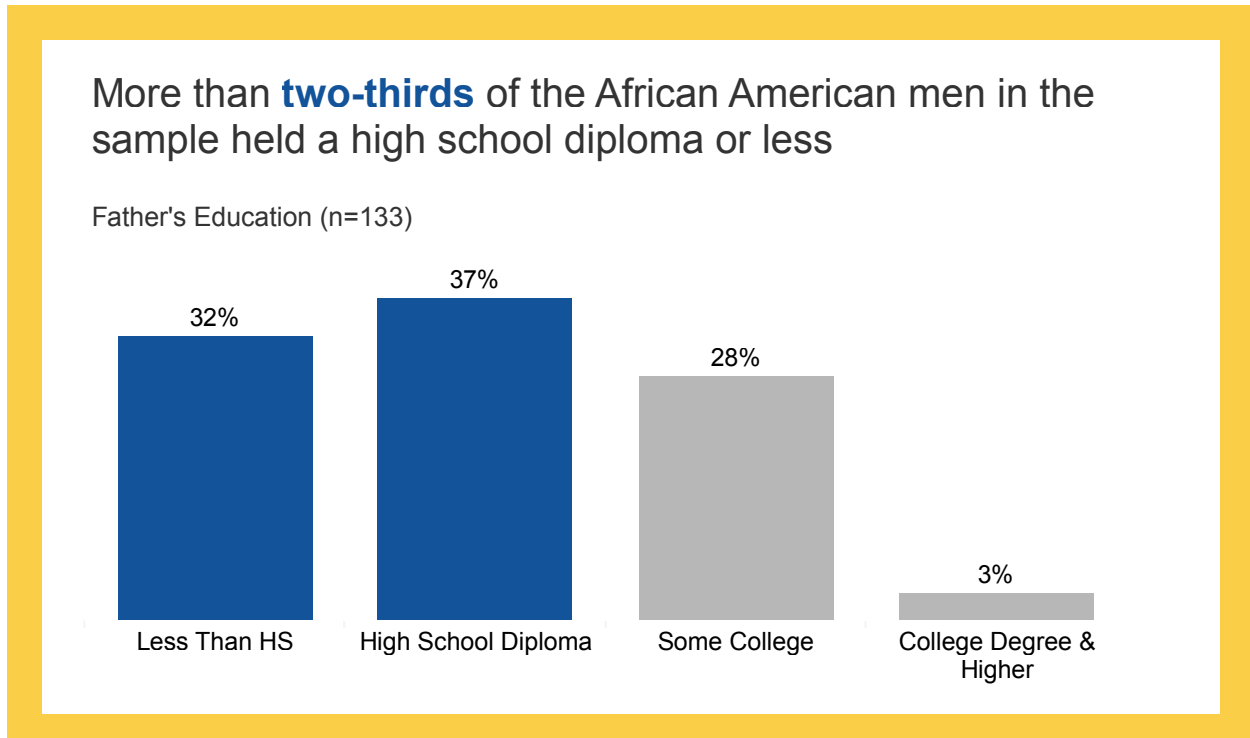


Demographic Findings

Education

Close to one-third of the fathers (32%) reported obtaining less than a high school degree; 37% percent reported obtaining a high school degree; 28% reported some college; and 3% reported obtaining a college or graduate degree.

Figure 6. Educational levels for fathers.

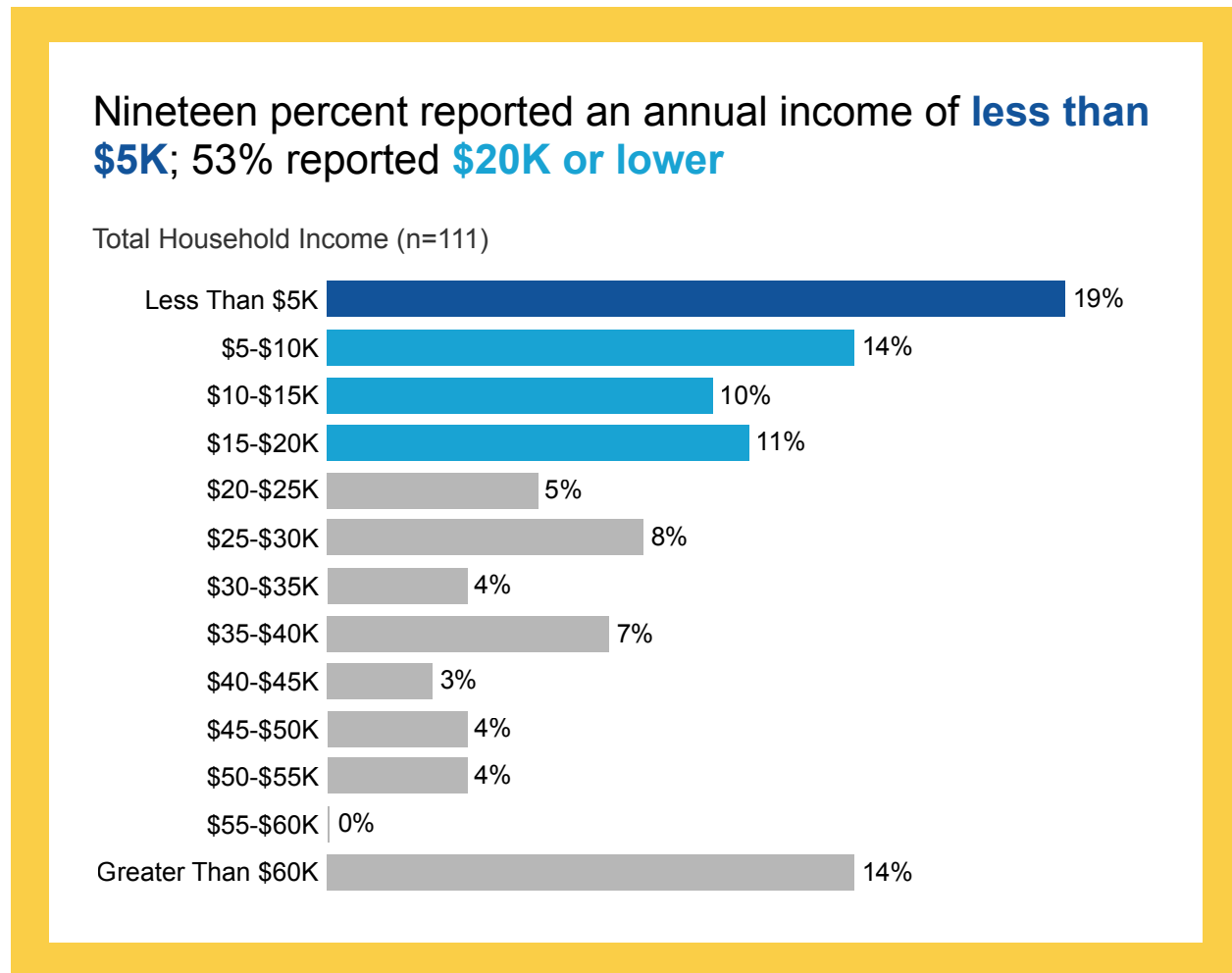




Income

Nineteen percent of respondents reported an annual household income of less than \$5,000, and 53% of the respondents reported a household income of \$20,000 or lower. When examining the continuous variable for total household income, the average household income was \$27,658 (see Table on page 12).

Figure 7. Total yearly household income for fathers.

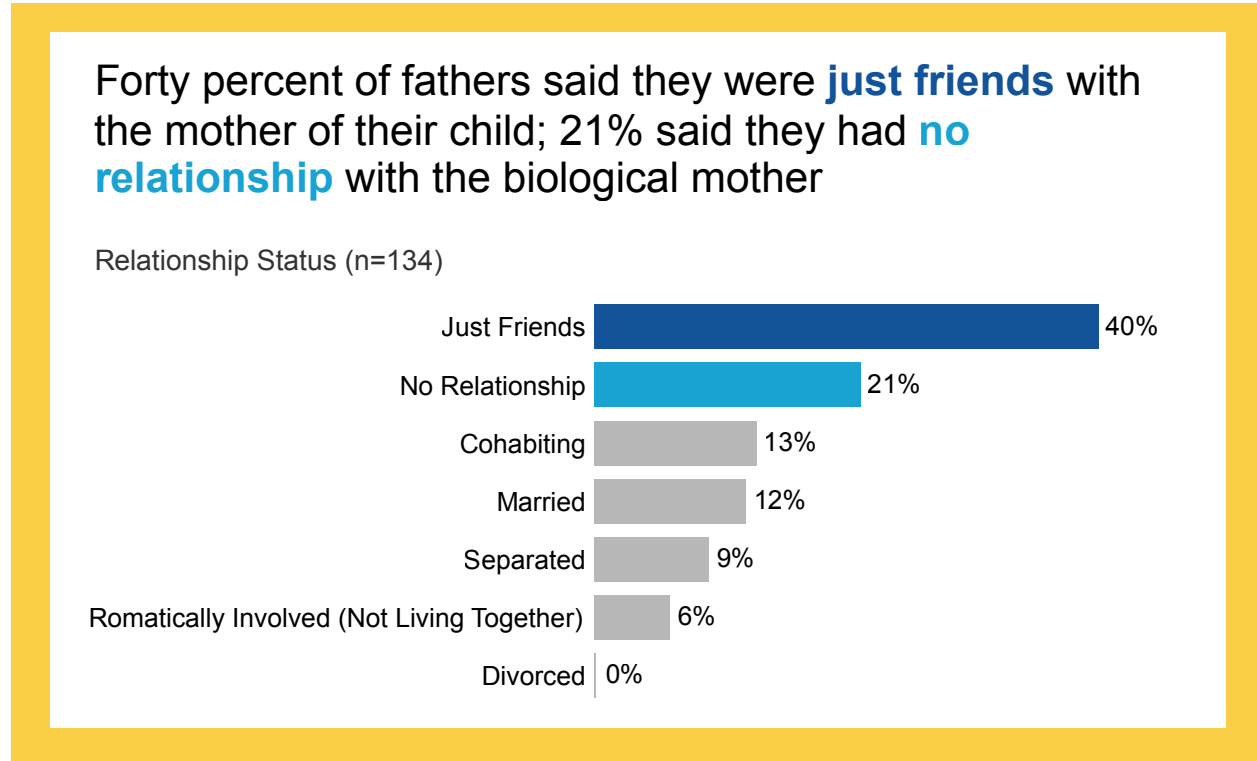




Relationship Status

Most fathers (39%) reported being friends with the mother of the focal child followed by 21% of fathers who reported no relationship with the biological mother. Twelve percent of the fathers reported being married to the mother; none reported being divorced; 13% reported cohabiting; 9% separated; and 6% reported being romantically involved with the birth mother of the focal child and not living together.

Figure 8. Current relationship status for fathers with birth mother of focal child.

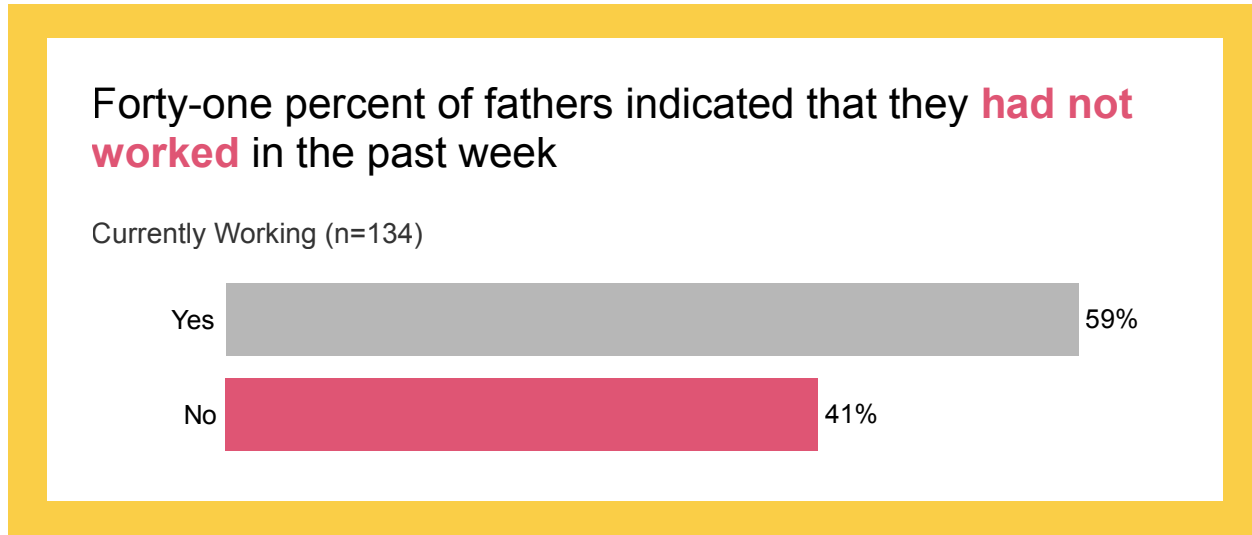




Work Status

Most fathers (59%) indicated that they did work in the past week for regular pay and 41% indicated that they had not worked.

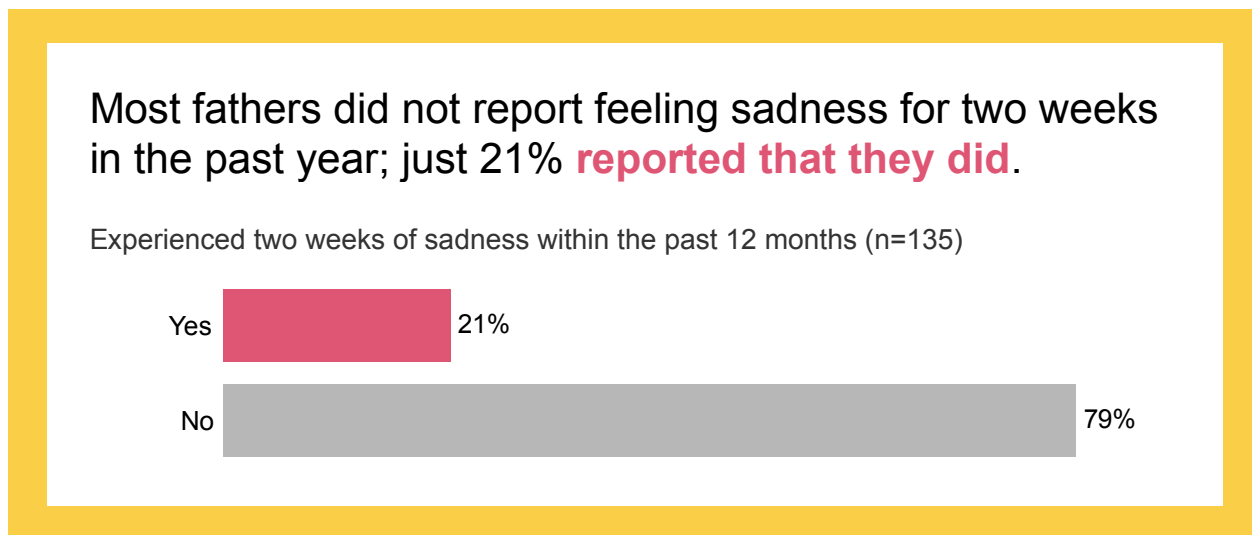
Figure 9. Work status for fathers.



Reports of Sadness

Most fathers (79%) did not report feeling sadness for two weeks in the past year; however 21% reported that they did.

Figure 10. Father experienced two weeks of sadness within past year.

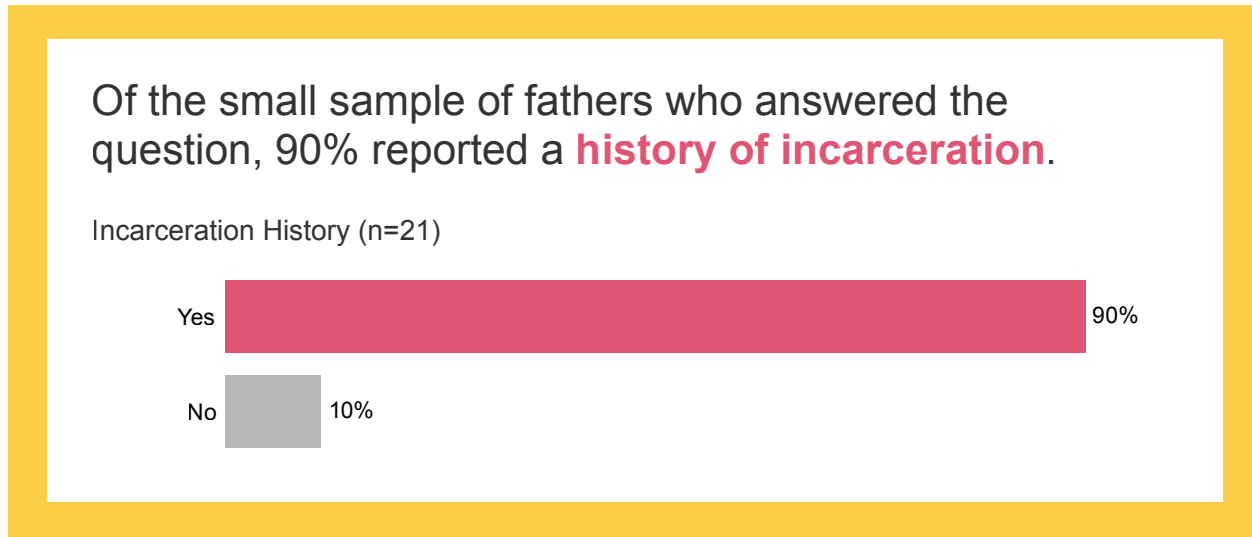




Incarceration History

A small sample of the fathers answered the question about incarceration history (n=21). Of the fathers who responded to this question, 90% reported a history of incarceration.

Figure 11. Incarceration history for fathers.



Descriptive Statistics (Table 1.)

	n	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Father's education	133	1	4	2.02	.85
Has {FATHER} paid anything toward {{CHILD}} /your children's support in the past twelve months?	71	1	2	1.56	.50
Amount of unpaid arrears, continuous variable	23	86	65,000	10,435.04	13,782.38
Has mother received TANF in past 12 months	224	1	1	1.00	0
Has father paid anything in child support in past 12 months	71	0	1	.44	.50
Is the father avoiding child support requests from mother	85	1	3	1.48	.63
Relationship quality with birth mother	130	1	5	2.91	1.32
Coparenting quality/trust variable	53	1	4	3.75	.68
Paternal engagement in activities with child	92	0	4	2.13	.95
Any incarceration history	21	0	1	.90	.30
Taking medication for depression	22	0	1	.23	.43
Experienced 2 weeks of sadness w/in past 12 months	135	1	2	1.79	.41
Continuous number for income	113	0	100,000	27,657.93	24,745.34
Does father have unpaid arrears	70	0	1	.59	.50
Romantically involved with birth mother	134	0	1	.25	.43
Valid N (listwise)	0				



Bivariate Analysis

Tables 2a and 2b present the Pearson correlations for the variables in the current research brief. Fathers' education was negatively related to the amount of unpaid arrears ($r = -.40, p = .05$), which indicates that higher levels of education were moderately related to lower amounts of unpaid arrears, and vice versa. Fathers' education was positively related to income ($r = .30, p = .001$), meaning that higher levels of education were related to higher levels of income, and vice versa. Romantic involvement with the birth mother was positively related to relationship quality ($r = .25, p < .01$) and paternal engagement ($r = .45, p < .001$). Additionally, coparenting quality/trust was positively related to relationship quality ($r = .50, p < .001$), which indicates that higher levels of coparenting quality was related to higher levels of relationship quality, and vice versa.

Inability to pay child support was positively related to avoiding the biological mother's requests for the father to pay child support, and the strength of this relationship was moderate ($r = .53, p < .001$). This correlation indicates that feeling strongly that one could not pay child support was positively related to being more avoidant of requests to pay child support, and vice versa. Income was positively related to education ($r = .30, p = .001$), paying child support within the past 12 months ($r = .62, p < .001$), and working ($r = .33, p < .001$). Working status was also positively related to fathers paying child support within the past 12 months ($r = .33, p < .05$) and paternal engagement ($r = .27, p < .05$). Lastly, incarceration history had a strong positive relationship with unpaid arrears ($r = .62, p < .05$).

Multiple Linear Regression

Multiple linear regression was utilized to determine if income and education (resource-related, sociodemographic variables) predicted child support payment within the past 12 months. The overall regression was statistically significant $R^2 = 0.32, F(2, 23) = 7.10, p = .004$. Income significantly predicted child support payment within the past 12 months ($\beta = .63, p = .002$). However, education did not significantly predict child support payment ($\beta = -.04, p = .84$). Relational sociodemographic variables such as relationship quality, paternal engagement, and coparenting quality did not prove to be significant predictors of child support payments.

Discussion

The current research brief provides an overview of the sociodemographic background of African American fathers whose families receive TANF support. The current sample is comparable to previous samples examining African American fathers with limited resources. For example, the average total household income for fathers in the current sample was \$27,658, and 42% of the respondents reported a yearly household income of \$15,000 or less. According to the federal poverty guideline (2025) issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, \$15,650 is the poverty guideline for a household with one person. This guideline indicates that less than half of the fathers in the current study are living at the federal poverty guideline—a trend that has persisted among inter-regional samples of African American fathers nationwide (Hodges et al., 2020; Sorensen et al., 2007). An overview of the main findings of the study is provided below and categorized according to Pleck and colleagues'



(1987) conceptualization of father involvement, which includes the following domains: engagement, access, and responsibility. Our study focused primarily on paternal engagement and responsibility.

Paternal Engagement

African American fathers demonstrated moderate levels of paternal engagement with their children, which means they spent a considerable amount of time reading to their children, helping them with homework, and playing sports together. For example, 49% of fathers reported speaking with their children about how their day went every day. Additionally, 44% of fathers reported making sure their children completed homework every day. These findings of high paternal engagement for African American fathers complement previous research findings (Adler, 2023), which demonstrated that African American fathers were more likely to participate in activities such as bathing children, reading with children, and bedtime routines when compared to white and Hispanic fathers.

The paternal engagement outcomes of the current study also highlight a very important aspect of father involvement, which is that responsibility extends beyond financial support. It also includes emotional, physical, and educational support—all of which are components of paternal identity that are supported by recent qualitative and quantitative studies (Cooper et al., 2020; Coates & Phares, 2019; Thomas et al., 2022).

In reference to the coparenting relationship, fathers reported relatively high levels of coparenting quality/trust with the biological mother, meaning that fathers felt they could trust the mother to take good care of the focal child; they felt the mother supported them in how they wanted to raise the focal child; they felt like they could talk about issues that come up with raising the focal child; and they respected the wishes for how the mother would like to raise the child. This is a promising finding that counters recent qualitative data demonstrating relatively contentious and challenging coparenting relationships for African American fathers (Shears et al., *in press*).

Paternal Responsibility

As highlighted earlier, the fathers reported considerable financial hardship, which was implicated in fathers reporting \$10,435 in unpaid child support, on average. This can be extremely problematic for African American fathers due to the harsh penalization of unpaid child support by the judicial system, and the current sample demonstrated a strong positive correlation between unpaid child support and incarceration history, which may highlight structural influences at play. Interestingly, many of the fathers did not answer the incarceration history question, but of the 21 fathers who responded to the incarceration history question, 90% reported a history of incarceration. Prior research has demonstrated that fathers with an incarceration history are less likely to be employed when compared to their counterparts without an incarceration history (Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011). Furthermore, when they can find employment, they typically report lower wages and provide lower levels of financial support for their children (Schwartz-Soicher et al., 2011). For African American fathers, an incarceration history is particularly harmful to their paternal identity and disruptive to their engagement with their children (Lewis & Hong, 2020).

Financial hardship, incarceration history, and compromised paternal identity are a perfect storm for creating emotional distress. The current research revealed that 21% of fathers reported experiencing sadness within the past two weeks. Recent data (2021) from the National Survey



on Drug Use and Health found that only 6.2% of men reported a major depressive episode within the past year, so the current sample of men reported greater rates of depressed mood than would be expected in the general population. While we did not use a validated scale to assess major depression, the proxy of sadness within the past two weeks illustrates that a significant number of fathers (21%) had recently experienced a depressed mood. It appears that fathers in the current sample are not only experiencing financial hardship, but a significant amount of them are also experiencing emotional hardship, as well.

For fathers who strongly believed that they would have difficulty paying child support, this belief was positively related to avoiding mothers' request for child support payment. Thus, fathers experiencing financial difficulties may be more prone to avoiding requests for child support. Income was shown to be a significant predictor of child support payment within the past 12 months. Relational variables were also examined to determine if they predicted any of the variance in child support payment, and none of the regression models that included relational variables were significant. It appears that the tangible resource variable of total household income had the most significant impact on child support payment, which is not surprising.

Despite having a good coparenting relationship, or being a highly engaged father, it appears that having the financial means to provide child support is the most predictive factor influencing child support payments.

The child support outcomes in this brief should be considered in light of the research demonstrating that in-kind child support (providing goods directly to the child) may have a more robust, positive effect on child well-being and father/child bonding than formal monetary support (*Nelson & Edin, 2020; Waller et al., 2018*). The current research adds value to our understanding of the meaningful ways in which African American fathers engage with their children that extend beyond financial support. Furthermore, the unique contextual experiences at the individual and relational levels provide insight on how these factors may be associated with African American fathers' ability to engage with their children. The current results are overwhelmingly positive and demonstrate a relatively high level of paternal engagement for African American fathers despite economic and emotional hardship.





Limitations

The current sample size was relatively small, and it may be difficult to generalize the findings to the larger target population. In addition, the demographic of fathers within the current sample was primarily African American men who held a high school diploma or less (69%) and reported a household income of \$15,000 or less (42%). The current sample may not be representative of the larger demographic of African American fathers who do not experience financial insecurity.

Future Directions

A phenomenological approach to understanding the lived experiences of African American fathers' engagement with their children who are receiving TANF support could potentially provide a great level of depth and insight beyond what secondary data analysis alone can provide. For example, the Office of Child Support Services provides a framework for researchers to leverage the expertise of individuals (e.g., noncustodial parents, formerly incarcerated people, etc.) impacted by child support programs by centering their lived experiences and personal knowledge (*Hinkle et al., 2022*). As the toolkit suggests, engaging people with lived experiences can inform research designs, program components, target population needs, and compensation protocols (*Hinkle et al., 2022*). Not only would a qualitative approach provide more insight on fathers' experiences, but it could possibly provide insight towards solutions that would improve outcomes for the entire familial system. As previous qualitative studies have demonstrated, African American fathers' recommendations offer researchers rich understandings into how they experience and negotiate disparate economic challenges, traditional gender norms, and social identities of African Americans (*Brito et al., 2014; Pate, 2005; Pate 2016; Thomas et al., 2022*). It would be important to gather this qualitative insight on the individual level of the father and also to gather this depth of insight from policymakers, practitioners, and individuals who work within the judicial system. Researchers can employ an ecological systems lens and utilize community-based participatory research methods to join in with the community on various micro- and macro-levels that impact fathers and the support they provide for their children.





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