

BRINGING FATHERS INTO FOCUS FOR CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

Opportunities and Examples from The Field



Ascend at the Aspen Institute: Ascend is the national hub for breakthrough ideas and collaborations that move children and the adults in their lives toward educational success and economic security. We take a two-generation (2Gen) approach to our work and embrace a commitment to gender and racial equity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the fathers and leaders whose work and engagement in the Fatherhood Learning and Action Community informed this publication.

We are grateful for the support and partnership of the Kresge Foundation Human Services Program.

We would like to acknowledge James White for writing and Nicole Geldart for designing this publication and Reggie Bicha, Tiffany Day, Lori Severens, and Marjorie Sims for co-facilitation of the Fatherhood LAC.

FATHERHOOD LEARNING AND ACTION COMMUNITY

Fathers

- Demetrius Jones, [Center for Urban Families](#)
- Lamont Thompson, [Alameda County Fathers Corps](#)
- Allan Wachendorfer, [Vera Institute of Justice](#)

Organizations



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Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago



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While families with low incomes are disproportionately headed by single mothers, it is clear that acknowledging and addressing the intentional marginalization of fathers, particularly those from Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities, is a necessary step in ensuring intergenerational cycles of opportunity.

The evidence is clear; fathers — regardless of residential or relationship status — play a critical role in children's health and influence maternal well-being. Fathers' contributions to children's development have been associated with improved cognitive development, social responsiveness, and independence across the lifespan. A growing body of research suggests that mothers whose partners are engaged in the prenatal period access health services at higher rates, experience lighter workloads, and are at lower risks for post-partum depression.

As we reimagine our public systems and services to work better for families, we have an opportunity to do so in a way that honors the full diversity of family structures and builds upon families' inherent resilience. This requires an intentional and explicit commitment to applying a gender lens inclusive of fathers to our analyses of family-supportive policy, practice, and research.

With this recognition, underscored by ongoing gender analyses and recognition of the dearth of policies and programs that support fathers' roles in child and family well-being, Ascend at the Aspen Institute convened leaders across policy, practice, and research to identify policy barriers, programmatic best practices, and opportunities across domains to more effectively engage fathers in efforts aimed at supporting children and families. Applying a two-generation (2Gen) lens to its analysis, the Fatherhood Learning and Action Community (LAC) prioritized opportunities that build family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously moving children and the adults in their lives toward economic security, educational success, and health and well-being. A commitment to honoring families as they define themselves undergirded the LAC's work.

The Fatherhood LAC carried out most of its work in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which we saw leaders, systems, and structures respond in ways that centered whole family well-being like never before. What follows are opportunities to sustain and build upon leadership, recognizing the inextricable link between health, work, and family and the commonsense health and economic action necessary to ensure prosperity for all families.

This report reflects an analysis of challenges and opportunities for leaders and entities committed to the well-being of children and families to more effectively engage fathers for family prosperity. Our analysis surfaced the following opportunities:

- I. Ensuring Noncustodial Parent, Father-Inclusive Lenses Are Applied to Decision-Making**
- II. Reframing Narratives to More Accurately and Positively Reflect Fathers' Roles in Families and Communities**
- III. Developing a Research and Evaluation Framework Around Whole Family, Father Engagement and Support**
- IV. Transforming Criminal and Civil Legal Systems and Reexamining Public and Private Policies and Practices to Support Justice-Involved Families**
- V. Adopting Father-Inclusive and Supportive Principles Across Public and Private Funding Streams**
- VI. Making Family-Focused Public Assistance, Systems, Supports, and Services Accessible to Noncustodial Fathers**

Each section offers context, opportunities, and examples to improve outcomes for children and families within and across the systems they navigate.

As we settle into a new decade already marked by a pandemic and a presidential election that saw more Americans cast ballots than in any election in over a century, the challenges and opportunities ahead are many. While we hold differing opinions on much, we know this to be true: there are leaders ready and willing to embrace a set of values that honor all of our humanity and that center children and families who deserve our full support and sustained investment. This work will be more important than ever in the months and years ahead as we heal, restore, and rebuild our communities, systems, and structures so that they work for families in ways long promised but yet to be realized.

As leaders at all levels and across all sectors of society work to make good on the promise of America for their constituencies, let us focus our attention where need, opportunity, and momentum are greatest — on families and communities with low incomes. In so doing, we must center racial equity — accounting for and addressing systemic barriers to opportunity in BIPOC communities — and apply a gender analysis that honors the roles of fathers and other noncustodial and nonbiologic caregivers in building family prosperity.

Leadership guided by these principles and informed by lived experiences will provide families and communities that represent the fully diversity of our nation with opportunities to make the American dream a reality.



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“THE MOST IMPORTANT ROLE I WILL EVER PLAY IS THAT OF BEING A FATHER.”

— Allan Wachendorfer, Program Associate, Center for Sentencing and Corrections, Vera Institute of Justice



The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit organization committed to realizing a free, just, and equitable society. Since its founding in 1949, the Institute has been driving change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the most critical challenges facing communities in the United States and around the world. Headquartered in Washington, DC, the Institute has a campus in Aspen, Colorado, and an international network of partners.

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