

A photograph of a man and a young girl painting on an easel outdoors. The girl is holding a red paintbrush and painting on the easel. The man is holding a green paintbrush and looking at the girl. They are both smiling. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a blue tarp and some greenery.

STATEWIDE

# FATHERHOOD

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

UNIVERSITY  
OF WISCONSIN-  
MADISON  
EXTENSION

HUMAN  
DEVELOPMENT AND  
RELATIONSHIPS  
INSTITUTE







# Statewide Fatherhood Needs Assessment

University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension

Human Development and Relationships Institute

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## Our Journey

UW-Madison Division of Extension realized that we were not serving fathers in our outreach programming at anywhere near the same extent that we had been serving mothers.



Given the importance of fathers for child development and family well-being, fathers should be a major target audience for Extension programming as well as for other family-serving organizations and community service providers. Given that fathers are systematically underserved in these areas, before diving in and creating new programming for fathers, we decided to take a step back and intentionally assess what fathers in Wisconsin need and where the gaps are in current services.

## Methods

Thirty-five fathers gave input via seven focus groups (one in Spanish and six in English).

Fathers in different parenting situations participated: fathers with full custody, fathers who share custody with co-parents, fathers without custody, and fathers impacted by the criminal legal system.

Thirty-two community partners provided input via twelve interviews and six surveys. Organizations included but were not limited to family service providers, child protection, domestic violence agencies, human services, and jails.



# Findings



## **BIG PICTURE QUESTION 1:**

### **How do fathers define successful fatherhood?**

Fathers shared what fatherhood meant to them: active involvement, nurturing relationships, and role modeling. Another finding emerged around fathers' desire to be fathers and to be involved with their children, despite the numerous barriers and challenges fathers face.



## **BIG PICTURE QUESTION 2:**

### **What do Wisconsin fathers need most?**

Fathers' needs emerged from discussions with fathers and community partners and were arranged into four main themes:

- 1) Basic Life Needs and Resources**
- 2) Parenting Support**
- 3) Systemic Barriers to Fatherhood**
- 4) Challenges and Consequences Related to the Legal System**

Overall, fathers need more than just parenting support. Their ability to get their basic needs met and to successfully navigate the legal system (both criminal and family court) impede their ability to be fully engaged in their fatherhood role. This is further exacerbated by society's attitudes and gender norms that negatively impact fathers.



## **BIG PICTURE QUESTION 3:**

### **What are possible solutions?**

Opportunities for future programming to better support fathers includes: 1) helping fathers and father figures with parenting by designing programming and resources for fathers' specific needs; 2) creating spaces for fathers and father figures to come together around their role as parents; 3) adapting existing parenting programming and resources to be more inclusive and welcoming towards fathers; 4) helping fathers advocate for their rights; and 5) increasing society's value of fathers through broadly disseminating research and information about the importance of fatherhood for family well-being.





**This report demonstrated the many challenges fathers face in being present for their children and highlighted the need to re-evaluate how we as a culture value fathers, fatherhood, and parenting more broadly. Fathers in this needs assessment repeatedly expressed challenges to being included and welcomed across many parenting contexts, and are unable to overcome the expectation that their primary role in the family is to be a financial provider. Meeting the needs of fathers, those discussed in this report and more broadly, is likely to result in downstream benefits for the whole family, and is of critical importance.**





# Statewide Fatherhood Needs Assessment

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**Based on our findings, we generated five key recommendations:**



**1) Disseminate findings and collaborate across sectors**



**2) Create and facilitate peer support for fathers**



**3) Hire and engage more men in family serving professions**



**4) Engage mothers and other parental figures in fatherhood work**



**5) Increase awareness of attitudes and stigmas that serve as barriers to father engagement**



The landscape of parenting in Wisconsin can be positively impacted using the findings from this report in combination with existing knowledge about fathers' contribution to child and family well-being. These recommendations cannot be successfully carried out or sustained long-term without strong partnerships. While we want to acknowledge the important progress being made by fatherhood groups, projects, organizations, and agencies in their communities of influence, including many communities in Wisconsin, we are calling for change on a bigger, broader scale. The kind of work where all community serving agencies are key stakeholders standing shoulder to shoulder with fathers. To this end, we include below a set of key recommendations that we believe will help move this critical work forward.



### **Recommendation 1: Disseminate findings and collaborate across sectors**

The first step is to disseminate the findings from this report across the state of Wisconsin. We suggest that community partners facilitate discussions with people in their organization and communities around them. Use this report, and corresponding products, to talk to others about father-related initiatives or the importance of valuing fathers.

This report needs to be translated and shared with a wide array of community partners, including but not limited to directors of family serving agencies, parents, judges in family court, sheriffs and law enforcement, and government officials or other policy makers.



### **Recommendation 2: Create and facilitate peer support for fathers**

Social connections are one of the protective factors that help families thrive and stay resilient. Yet, one of the biggest resources lacking for most fathers is a sense of community with others. We recommend that family serving agencies work to provide an environment for fathers to foster social connections and facilitate peer groups of fathers with shared experiences. One of the most prevalent findings in this report across both fathers and community partners is the desire for fathers to learn from and support each other. Fathers are seeking opportunities to acknowledge shared experiences and a space to celebrate, commiserate, and problem solve together.



### **Recommendation 3: Hire and engage more men in family serving professions**

For people to feel welcome and included, family serving organizations must have staff that reflects the diversity

## **WHAT CAN I DO?**

Perhaps you are a director of an agency and will call a meeting to discuss fatherhood, or perhaps you will decide to talk with a coworker about father-related initiatives. Another starting point is to speak up, even in small ways, when you notice fathers being excluded, stereotyped, or otherwise devalued. Remind people around you that fathers are more than babysitters or financial providers. If you are a family service provider, make small steps towards including fathers. Try some things out, talk with fathers, keep what works over time and adapt. View this as a marathon, not a sprint.



of the populations served. This would necessitate recruiting, hiring, and retaining fathers as staff and program leaders. It is important to create settings in which fathers are leading, organizing, mentoring and teaching each other. It is important to compensate fathers for their contributions to program development and delivery and place value on their lived experiences.



### **Recommendation 4: Engage mothers and other parental figures in fatherhood work**

While empowering and supporting fathers is an essential task, they are only one of many possible parenting figures. In order for fathers to be successful, mothers and other parental figures need to partner in the process of elevating positive fatherhood. Mothers and other co-parents need to reflect on their own gatekeeping behaviors and acknowledge the importance of involving fathers in their children's lives. In order for progress to be made, mothers and other co-parents must view fathers as capable caregivers and to provide them with space to learn, make reasonable mistakes, adapt, and recover. This may help empower fathers and allow all parents to adapt to changing family dynamics.



### **Recommendation 5: Increase awareness of attitudes and stigmas that serve as barriers to father engagement**

More broadly, systemic change within our communities and culture in which fathers live must be a priority. Policies, systems and environmental work is needed to address the broader attitudes, stigma, and gender norms that challenge fathers' abilities to be fathers. We must increase the value our society, as a whole, places on fathers and fatherhood. One way to help accomplish this is through mass media campaigns. For example, we should proliferate communities with messages and images of fathers' providing nurturing relationships, as well as research that highlights the critical importance of father engagement in family well-being.





# RESULTS



Our results are presented in three main sections, each of which cover one of the **three big picture evaluation questions** that motivated this needs assessment:



Prior to discussing the specific research questions, we briefly discuss one overarching theme that emerged throughout the data.

## **Overarching Theme: Fathers want to be fathers**


Across all focus groups, one overarching theme emerged that was not directly related to our evaluation questions. We named this theme “fathers want to be fathers,” and it represented the many ways that fathers reported wanting to be part of their children’s lives. This included wanting to spend more time or quality time with their children, wanting to be there for their children, and putting in an effort to be with their children, even when facing significant challenges. Fathers reported fatherhood being a source of pride, affection, and responsibility, and a desire to do their best in this role. Community partners also reported that in situations where fathers may not have custody, they still wanted to be kept informed of what is happening in their child’s life.

While fathers expressed a strong desire to be with their children, many also reported internal and external barriers that stood in the way. Some of these challenges included not being able to get enough time with their children, difficulties in navigating the legal system, or having to move away from their children due to employment. Many of these challenges are described in other sections of this report.

Despite these barriers, many fathers reported that they are willing to make changes to their lives, to make self-sacrifices for their children, in order to be a consistent presence and support.




We acknowledge that there is a wide variety of parenting and co-parent situations, many of which are not exclusive to one mother and one father. However, throughout this report community partners and fathers mainly reference mothers or assume mothers are the other parenting partner.




**"So what I need to change is my ways, my criminal thinking, my T for C [Thinking for a Change, a behavioral change program], what I do as a father, as a parent. I need to be more involved, be more active. I say I play an active role in their lives but I'm not in their lives when I'm locked up, you know? So I'm only doing this to myself. In the same breath it's just like, it's hard with the judicial system and everything that's standing in the way. I don't know. It's hard." (Father Focus Group - Legal System)**

This theme emerged across all focus groups and types of fathers, as demonstrated by the following quotes:



**FATHER 1: "I don't give up. I keep coming. I keep showing up. I think that's my proudest thing about fatherhood, is that I don't just walk away."**

**FATHER 2: "I think that's the biggest thing too with me is, I don't give up either. My first wife with my kids, she always said she wanted me to have contact with them. And I never gave up calling them. I never gave up seeing them. I stopped by the house as much as I could." (Father Focus Group - Non-custodial)**



**"And my kids, they're just-- they're my everything. I wouldn't change nothing. But I would change me being there. I'd want to be there versus being here. So wouldn't change nothing about them or who they are, but I'd change who I am, who I can be." (Father Focus Group - Legal System)**

**"For me, for sure, the hardest thing is just being physically distant from my boys and not getting to be with them physically. So I just feel like I'm missing a lot of the little things." (Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)**

**"I think that-- we try to be more with them, but sometimes it's also difficult. For one, because you have to go to work and have time for them." (Father Focus Group - Latino fathers)**

**"It can be very easy to make things that are around the home or your job more important than the time with your kids. And so I've certainly been working on that, right, finding time. And if it's an hour or two or whatever it is, right, or put the devices down completely and quality time. Right? That's, I think, really important." (Father Focus Group - Full custody)**

**"And I don't want them to not know their daddy, to not know me. And it's like, I want to be with them." (Father Focus Group - Non-custodial)**





# BIG PICTURE QUESTION 1:

## How do fathers define successful fatherhood?

The fathers who participated in the focus groups shared their thoughts and reflections about fatherhood and what being a father meant to them. Fathers shared many ideas including that fatherhood is a huge responsibility, the importance of breaking societal norms, and their strengths. Overall, the three following themes emerged that reflect what is most important to fathers: active involvement, nurturing relationships, and role modeling. These themes also emerged in interviews with community partners in the discussion about fatherhood roles and their importance in the development of children. In this section, we highlight the top three themes that emerged for this research question. For a full list of categories that emerged in the analysis, see the [Appendix](#).

### Theme 1: Active Involvement

Fathers consistently reported that having access to their children and being actively involved in their lives was very important to them. The definition of being actively involved ranged across responses, and included things like being part of daily activities and routines, positive communication and listening to their children, being involved in schooling or learning, providing for their basic needs, or spending quality time and doing activities together.

**"To me it means just being there when your child needs you, whether it be good or bad, and just kind of being their friend, but also finding that fine line between friend and a parent."**

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

**"And I'm proud of the things that we've done together that makes us bond. I'm real active in my boy's life. We go camping, we go fishing, we go bicycling-- we do everything together whenever I have them."** *(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

**"The love that I have for my children is unquestionable. And it don't matter what happens, I'm going to be with my children. If I have to sacrifice my free time to be with them, it doesn't matter. I'm going to be there for them."** *(Father Focus Group - Latino Fathers)*

**"So I feel that being there for them is the most important thing that I have to do today. To be there for them, whatever they need... To provide 100% for them. That's it, love and material needs. That I'd be there 100% for them."** *(Father Focus Group - Latino fathers)*

**"So I guess what makes me proud as a father is, when I have them, they have my full attention. I make sure my work phone is shut off."** *(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

Additionally, some fathers shared that the topic of involvement triggers emotions and was difficult to discuss. Fathers shared that the health of their relationship with the mothers has an impact on their access to their children and that long-distance should not be a barrier to being involved in their children's lives.

Fathers also shared how important it was to be able to use video conferencing to speak with their children and even read to their children when they are not able to be there physically. Fathers expressed how they recognize the importance of their presence in their children's lives and being patient with themselves and open to learning was vital.

## Theme 2: Nurturing Relationships

Fathers were very expressive about showing and receiving love and care for (and from) their children. They shared the impact of not receiving that kind of nurturing when they were children themselves and recognize how important it is to not repeat those same behaviors. Fathers in the focus groups also shared how important it was that their children felt safe communicating with them, especially on sensitive topics.

**"And where my heart is, is really to just provide that space to support them in everything that they bring." (Father Focus Group - Full Custody)**

**"Let them know that I love them. Tell them that a lot. I didn't get that a lot when I was growing up. And so that's something that I wanted to do as a father is let my sons know that their father loves them a lot and appreciates them."**

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

**". . . just telling her-- she knows I love her. I say it a lot. Being communicative, giving her space to talk, so that she can express herself. She's eight, so it's kind of a fun age where she's starting to have a lot of opinions. And then supporting her or just giving her that open venue to talk and know that communication between us is clear, and there's no judgments. And I always want to support her and let her know that."**

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

The positive effects of fathers showing affection and nurturing behavior towards their children extend beyond just good grades, growth, and development. Some of the other important benefits include the impact it has on the way children value gender equality, healthy competition, and emotional intelligence (Shafer, 2021).





### Theme 3: Role Modeling

Fathers in these focus groups clearly expressed how their mentoring and role modeling impacts their children. They reflected on how teaching their children to show empathy, practice social etiquette, and make good choices were important to them. Additionally the fathers shared how they see themselves as teachers, provide guidance related to building and maintaining healthy relationships, and help them to recognize the difference between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

**"Being a father to me is a big responsibility. You're responsible, I believe, for teaching your child how to act as a person, how to-- teach him kindness and manners and such, and teach him right from wrong. You're his teacher, I feel. And they watch everything we do. So if we're doing things that ain't so right, take warning because maybe they're going to end up doing the same thing that we do that we're not too proud about. So being a father is a lot of responsibility. I mean, you could go on forever about it."**

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

**"So when I think about my role, and what that looks like, it's really to kind of help model what healthy relationships look like, whether it's from male or female or anything else."**

*(Father Focus Group - Full Custody)*

**"That's the biggest thing about being a father to me is that they can look up to me on everything that I do, and they realize that, no matter what, you're still human, and you're going to make mistakes."**

*(Father Focus Group - Full Custody)*

While fathers hold a strong vision for fatherhood, this needs assessment deeply explored the plethora of needs that can stand in their way of being the father that they want to be.





## BIG PICTURE QUESTION 2:

# What do Wisconsin fathers need support with most?

The needs that emerged from the interviews and focus groups were organized into four key themes:

- 1) Basic life needs and resources
- 2) Parenting support
- 3) Systemic barriers to fatherhood
- 4) Challenges and consequences related to the legal system

Despite the separate themes, many of our findings were interrelated and fathers' needs were often overlapping. Effective solutions require considering this interconnectedness. For example, finances and limited transportation can affect utilization of services, and lack of quality child care can interfere with fathers' abilities to attend parenting programming or access community resources, as well as meeting their own financial needs (e.g., employment). See the [\*\*Connections and Relationships Across Themes\*\*](#) section for more detail on these interrelationships.

## Theme 1: Basic Life Needs & Resources

Fathers reported needing support with basic needs and that this can be a barrier to being more fully involved with their children. Some of the most prevalent findings in this section include **economic demands on fathers, father social-emotional health, social connections, and father mental health (including substance use)**.

### ECONOMIC DEMANDS ON FATHERS

Many fathers expressed how it can be extremely difficult to balance work, parenting, self-care and relationships, especially when work takes up a large portion of time. Often, time with children is what gets sacrificed for these other pressing needs. One father summed this up well when he said, **"Work is definitely the most difficult thing that's keeping me from being the kind of parent I want to be. Because I can't be there for them as much as I want to be. Because I have to have a paycheck in order to afford to have a house, car, food, all this other stuff. So that's definitely the worst."** (*Father Focus Group - Full Custody*) Another father then shared, **"Work-life balance, it's very tilted towards the work side of the scale."** (*Father Focus Group - Full Custody*)

Needs related to working or employment can interfere with fathers' ability to be fully present in their children's lives or to be the best fathers they could be. Many fathers work long hours, physically demanding jobs, shift work, or multiple jobs. Fathers reported how it is challenging to



## Q2: FATHER'S NEEDS

juggle their multiple responsibilities (e.g., work, cooking, being present for children, making time for couple relationships). This can be exacerbated in co-parenting situations as fathers adjust to splitting their income with two households. In some cases, fathers described their long work hours as a factor contributing to their divorce or separation.

One father described how the lack of time with his children prevents him from passing his values on to them, **"... My time is very limited at this point, because I'm always either working two jobs, or I'm working one job like it's two jobs. That being done, I don't get very much quality time. And when I say quality time, I don't get a chance to sit my children down and teach them how to cook, read books, instill my values in them."** (*Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial*)

One community partner from a family resource center described how working can prevent fathers from being able to attend visits with their children, **"even if the kids are in foster care, they have to adhere to a certain schedule for visitation, and that doesn't always work into their work schedules."** Similarly, community partners suggested that these logistical challenges often affect fathers' abilities to access or use the services they provide. For example, two community partners from different domestic and sexual abuse organizations said, **"a lot of their working hours overlap with our working hours and our open hours"** and that fathers **"have busy and varied schedules to come to programs."** Further, another community partner who works at an enrichment center said:

**"When my single daddies come in, you know, and they're looking for maybe diapers, or something like that, we talk about different things, different resources out there that they can and should utilize. What they run into is they usually work during the day, so they don't have access to get to things. I have one daddy that his child was not enrolled in the WIC program for a long time, because he had to take off work to come."**

*(Community Partner - Family Resource Center)*





...my daughter, I don't see her all day. Because when I get out in the morning she's sleeping. When I come home at night she's sleeping. So I think that's something. One would want to have more time.

Fathers who identified as Latino described working so much that they sacrifice time with their children. In addition, the American aspiration of buying a home and having seemingly endless financial demands can create obstacles for fatherhood.

**FATHER 1:** "One of the things that's most difficult about being a father are the time in regards to work and time with kids that we being in a country, here, it's where we spend less time with our kids and work, right. We're at work more than with our children... But I believe that it's some of the sacrifices that a father does.

I think that one of the biggest obstacles that we have, I believe in my case as a father, would be to be living like this in a country where one cannot stop paying bills or stop paying. To pay bills, to pay rent. That you have maybe goals to buy a house or whatever. So there's that obstacle of not being a father. You have to be whatever you have to do to give the best for your children... To not be the father that they want to have, because one has to dedicate themselves more to be out looking for work or at work."

**FATHER 2:** "For example, I work from 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM. And sometimes I work from 3:30 to 9:00 at night. So when that happens- my daughter, I don't see her all day. Because when I get out in the morning she's sleeping. When I come home at night she's sleeping. So I think that's something. One would want to have more time.

*(Father Focus Group - Latino Fathers)*

While many fathers expressed pride in providing financially for children, it is often at the cost of time with their children.



### ● ● EMPLOYMENT

Fathers need support to find employment or better paying employment. Employment needs impact how much time fathers have to spend with their children and family, and this can be an even greater need when fathers are paying child support. *For related concepts, see [Economic Demands on Fathers](#) and [Child Support](#).*

Fathers who have tried to pursue education have sometimes found that this has not made a difference in their employment situation, their economic status, or feeling like they are making a difference in the world. It seemed as though for these fathers, this contributed to diminished self-esteem and self-worth.

**"I've always thought the judicial system was very interesting. And I've always wanted to play a position in it. But with an associate's degree, you can't be very much. You can probably be a security guard, but that's not going to make any difference. That's not going to help any situations. So I'm looking to go back to school. I don't know who I text. I don't know who I was talking to. I've been begging for help, you know what I'm saying?"**

Later in the same focus group...

**I want them [family] to see me do better. I want to be considered as somebody that helps the family, not someone that hinders us. At this point, I'm not of any help to them at all. It's like a disservice to have me around."**  
*(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*

This father also described both the difficulty of filling out online job applications and the inability to form in-person connections due to barriers associated with COVID-19.

**"With the computer, when I fill out an application, I get to certain parts...and then I freeze up, because I traveled so much, and I did so many jobs. And now, I'm trying to figure out what's the phone number, what's the address, what's the supervisor's name. And by the time I get through with that part of the application, I no longer have an interest in applying. It's like, oh, yeah, I'm done."**

Later in the same focus group...

**I've been trying to get my CDLs [commercial driver's license]. My brother, he's involved in truck driving. And my nephew just got involved. And I'm just-- with this whole COVID-19 situation, there is no coming in the office, and inquiring, and getting results. It's kind of you got to know somebody, or you got to be in the right place at the right time at this point."**  
*(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*

He also described how he knows his skills, but it can be hard to convey those effectively to a potential new employer. His quote also describes the need to be supported by employers who make a commitment to employees.

"I just got to find something better. I'm not computer savvy, but I'm a great communicator. I'm a great listener. I'm a hard worker. I do what I need to do. And I'm professional. But I can't say all of that on the computer and somebody find me, like oh, yeah, [father's name], we're going to hire you, and we're going to keep you, and we're going to help grow. No."

*(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*

A community partner described both the employer and employee roles in maintaining employment, **"Employers don't help individuals stay employed, employees need more soft-skills training, and to build a good track record with their employers."**

Finally, these quotes illustrate how finances, education, employment, and in some cases child support, are interrelated.

"Non-custodial parents-- more generally fathers-- who have some baggage that they bring to the education or job field, they may find they can't get further education because they owe a debt to an institution that won't admit them for new training programs until they clean up their debt."

*(Community Partner - Health & Human Services)*

"If he's working-- if he's working and child support takes 33% of his income, there is no program put in place to save him from being poor, overworked, uneducated. You're either going to work until your body gives out or your kids age out, where you don't have to pay anymore. You know what I'm saying?

I'm looking at it from the perspective of either I'm going to find a better way, or I have to face the fact that I'm going to be doomed this way. Because my son would be 18 when I turn 50. At 50 years old, people look at you as an old person who doesn't supposed to be in the workforce. So I better find my career quick, fast, and in a hurry, because time is ticking. And I don't want to run out of time. I don't want to run out of time. I want to find my way so that I don't end up a statistic.

I'm just facing my reality. And I just hope that-- I don't want to seem like I want a pity party or none of that. I just want somebody point me in the direction and say, hey, [call his name], if you go over there and work, they're going to pay you decent to work. \$15 an hour doesn't help my situation."

*(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*







## ● ● HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION, AND FINANCIAL NEEDS

“My daughter not having a stable place to come home to also interferes with my parenting time. Because we can’t sit in my car in the cold winter and just hang out and chill. We can go to the movies for shelter, but what about the days where she wants to pack a bag and spend the night. Now we’re at the hotel. And it’s just weird. Like there isn’t no housing for a man that’s single and doesn’t have a family.” (Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)

Some fathers need help with housing and transportation, and experience general cost of living and financial issues. Some fathers wonder if their families will qualify for public assistance when they need it, and others describe needing to choose between having either housing or transportation. Finding housing and managing money can be an overwhelming experience, especially during divorce or other major life changes. Some fathers experience lack of affordable housing and inability to find housing with significant income going towards other commitments. Fathers also face significant challenges as they often do not qualify for housing assistance if they do not have custody of their children, further distancing them from being able to provide for themselves or their families. Relatedly, some fathers are unable to obtain housing, or unable to share or sustain housing with their co-parent due to public housing rules.

The lack of basic needs also interferes with fathers’ ability to see their children or to focus on parenting. Several community partners remarked that rather than needing help with parenting, fathers needed help with poverty-related issues such as housing, finances, and transportation. For example, one community partner discussed how homeless fathers cannot have visits with their children:

“And trying to help somebody who is trying to maintain joint custody joint placement with children, if they are homeless, when they you know... suddenly we’re looking at a whole other system response to.. you can’t have overnight visits if they’re gonna be sleeping in your car, same with your buddies. So their inability to even have that until they can get housing often pushes them away from being involved.” (Community Partner - Domestic & Sexual Abuse)

Many community partner interviewees commented on transportation as a common barrier that fathers experience in attending programming or seeing their children. In terms of accessing services, one partner said:

**"Families down to one car, so mom has to go to work. That's more important. Then dad just stays home until mom gets home, and then he goes to his shift." And similar responses came in around attending visits with their children, such as this comment: "I also think poverty, again is very-- even transportation, just like what you're saying for visits, everybody needs a ride to the visit. And they need to get the kids to the visit." (Community Partner - Family Resource Center)**

Another community partner described the issue of some fathers not having driver's licenses and related ripple effects:

**"Yeah and then frequently they may not even have a license to drive. So there's those kinds of things, and again, frequently, that relates back to poverty issues or getting involved in criminal activity...they continue to get arrested for driving after revocation because they can't afford to pay the fine or whatever it is you need to do. So it's kind of like, you know, wouldn't we be way better off, kind of, just paying that for them? Because [it is certainly] very costly to put them back in jail." (Community Partner - Health & Human Services)**

## ● ● SOCIAL CONNECTIONS & FATHERS' SOCIAL EMOTIONAL HEALTH

Fathers value support from family, friends, and others and rely on these social connections for their own mental health. For example, fathers rely on close family and friends who have also been through divorce to help guide and support them. Fathers involved in the criminal legal system described how influential the people in their closest social circle are and how helpful it is to adapt their social network to have positive influences to change their own lives.

Seeking out social connections can be particularly difficult for fathers given the ingrained attitude that men are not supposed to be honest about their emotions.

**"While I am a heart-on-my-sleeve, dump it all out there kind of a guy, trying to connect with other fathers is very difficult on a personal level. Because most of them are in this cocoon of, I'm not supposed to be honest about my emotions." (Father Focus Group - Full Custody)**

Lack of adequate social connections, combined with difficulties around basic needs like transportation, can create stress and anxiety for fathers.

Being able to find connection within their communities, whether that is physical or social, can be challenging. Cultural, racial, and gender differences for fathers and their children bring additional challenges to finding natural connections in communities that have less diversity. Some fathers reported that their families struggle with social connections and sense of belonging when they see and feel racism in their communities or live far away from people with similar identities. Even when the experiences are not negative or adverse, it may be that deeper, richer relationships





are longed for with others who have similar lived experiences. This came up with two-father families and families raising multiracial children in white neighborhoods.

This quote highlights how different values and beliefs across families can make social connections difficult.




**FATHER 1:** “We’re two dads. And that kind of makes things a little bit different for our kids. But then, even both of our kids are multiracial. And we live in a very, very white community. And so that’s another piece that really is hard in trying to reach out and connect with people who aren’t even close. And then you can all relate to with just the busy life that we have between jobs and kids. Right? It’s hard to have connections that are an hour away. Right? Because we can’t do that, as well. So I think that that’s a piece that we try to reach out and connect with people. But, again, just where we are geographically and the diversity or lack thereof within our community makes parenting hard in lots of different contexts.”

**FATHER 2:** “I really appreciate that last point that you made about the influence of culture and the proximity to culture. We have a different idea of what-- how our kids should behave than, I would say, most of our community. We live in a very rural, very homogeneous, cisgendered community. And although my wife and I are in a traditional, so to speak, relationship, neither one of us really adhere to those same cultural norms that a lot of our-- most of our community does. And we want to raise our kids to-- we want to raise our kids to break those cultural normals, to create a new culture. And so much of what happens in our home is a reflection of what we want to see in the world around us. And the culture that surrounds us is inhibiting that growth in our kids.”

Father 2 goes on to say, “Our oldest daughter is also multicultural. And we live in a community that is surrounded by Native American tribes but the community here does not accept Native American people as having rights. And so we’re always struggling with those cultural barriers, as well. And it’s something that we have to deal with because we can’t move to an area that is more culturally diverse.”

*(Father Focus Group - Full Custody)*

Fathers discussed wanting dignity and independence and to be able to help themselves. Many fathers suffer from poor emotional management or coping skills due to lack of having these modeled for them by close social connections.




**"I know I mentioned that my father and my grandfather were in my life growing up. And they had some really great qualities. But they had absolutely no idea what they were doing. And since becoming a parent, I can see that they just had no tools. They had no knowledge, no education, no resources."**

*(Father Focus Group - Full Custody)*

In their wish to be the best role models they can be, fathers expressed wanting to address their own social emotional needs. While many fathers could recognize the need to manage their emotions, they also acknowledged that they struggle in doing so. In cases where fathers are separated from their children or involved in the legal system, some fathers described getting angry to the point of not being able to cope with feelings. Some fathers struggle with their feelings related to being separated from their children. Even when fathers are equipped with skills to understand trauma, whether their own or others', they discuss how sometimes barriers, like those stemming from the legal system, make it hard to sustain the patience or ability to stay calm.

## ● ● SELF-CARE


Some fathers expressed the importance of taking care of themselves and that this is critical in their ability to take care of others, like their children.



**"I'm still a first responder, but I've been doing that for many years. And one of the first things that we learn there-- this is just an analogy-- is that you can't help other people if you're in danger or you get injured yourself. So the challenge is taking care of yourself and being able to take care of your kids."**

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

Fathers also understand that nurturing their relationships with their partner is important. They reported that barriers like finding time, childcare support, a tendency to put children first and not wanting children to feel left out, or going through stressful situations like divorce, make prioritizing self-care difficult.



**"I would say my wife and I are really fortunate, right, so we can afford this. But I think time with your partner or to yourself is key. Right? So some level of a babysitting service, I think, would be super helpful for people. Right? Like, two hours for yourself or however you want to do it-- a drop off type service or a day where it's a kind of thing. I know it's critical to the success of the relationship of my wife and I in our home, right, is time to ourselves, personally. I think, as parents, we oftentimes will only put our kids first. And if you constantly will do that, right, it can be detrimental to your own personal health and well-being."**

*(Father Focus Group - Full Custody)*





“And we try to be more mindful of nurturing that [our relationship and ourselves], but then also describing that to our son, the importance of that. Because then he wants to know why he can’t go wherever with us. And we don’t want to make him feel like he’s not part of the family. Right? But, also, talking about the importance of our relationship and kind of digging out that time to make that equal. But that’s hard. And especially with COVID and e-learning and all kinds of things, it’s like that even made it harder for us to do any moments for us in our self-care. But we know it, right? But it’s just really hard to continue that, which is a really important piece.” (Father Focus Group - Full Custody)

“And you really do have to acknowledge yourself in this picture. And it can be real difficult when you’re going through-- especially in the meat of the divorce, it just gets hard. It just gets hard to-- you get caught up. And I guess...now, it’s easier for me to do it. But, back then, it was a lot harder.” (Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)

Another father also described the relationship between children’s needs and parents’ needs. He described one struggle of fatherhood as, **“figuring out when meeting my needs is impinging on what my kids need. And it’s a tough balance to strike.”** (Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)

### ● ● FATHERS' MENTAL HEALTH (INCLUDING SUBSTANCE USE)

Fathers acknowledged the need or desire for counseling or mental health support. Fathers feel they do not have natural peer support in some situations, especially non-custodial situations, to be able to openly express the challenges they experience as fathers. This leads to fathers feeling as though they have to build a strong exterior and express sadness, pain, and mental illness in isolation.

**"And dad has to learn how to pay, and smile, cry on his own. Because you can't let the kids see you. You can't let the kids see you go and have a mental breakdown. You got to stay strong for them, because they need strength from you."**

*(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*

The co-occurrence of addiction and unresolved mental illness can pose significant challenges to fathers who have been marginalized. Some fathers facing ongoing interaction with the legal system recognized that they need to face some of their own previous trauma before they will be ready for change. Many fathers involved with the legal system have the insight to know what the issue is and expressed wanting it to be different.

Fathers described the loss of physical, tangible things (e.g., home, family life, routines) during separation as throwing them into a state of worry. Although it can bring opportunities, the lack of knowing what will happen also creates anxiety.

**"It's devastating. Starting over is one of the hardest things that I've been through. Also, some parts are exciting. But, really, it kicks your butt. It's tough. So my challenge is just starting over. My name is off the mortgage. I got to go find a new house. What can I afford? I mean, there's so many different variables now that, uh-- the unknowns-- you don't know what's going to happen. And so you just sit and worry all the time."**

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*





A great deal is happening during parental separation; the need to protect individual welfare, the need to identify the best outcome for children, and an attempt to preserve some basic family structure from which to rebuild. The struggle to balance all these needs makes it hard for fathers to advocate for themselves and some fathers express shame or frustration about this afterwards, especially when they end up in circumstances they feel are stressful or unhealthy. Fathers who were incarcerated during the focus groups reported experiencing separation anxiety and sadness from being separated from their children.

The struggle to balance all these needs makes it hard for fathers to advocate for themselves and some fathers express shame or frustration about this afterwards, especially when they end up in circumstances they feel are stressful or unhealthy.

Fathers noted that moving towards accepting supportive mental health or alcohol and other drug abuse (AODA) services is not always easy. They stated personal resistance or a lack of readiness for these services as being the primary barrier.

Community partners also described fathers' needs for support with mental health and addiction or drug use. Many community partners that we interviewed identified that this was a big need for fathers, such as this interviewee: **"And I think the clientele that we deal with is a lot of alcohol and drug abuse. And as we know, especially with the meth part of it, is that the only ones they care about is themselves. And it kind of screws up their thinking that way."** (*Community Partner - Correctional Facility*)

Other community partners mentioned that fathers may feel defeated or feel like they do not have a chance because of their life circumstances or things they have experienced (e.g., custody, incarceration). On the other hand, some partners specifically identified the limited access or availability of mental health services. For example, one interviewee said:

**"And then two months later, you refer somebody over and they come back say, he's got six months waiting list or beyond. Whether it's anger management, or addiction. Last time I heard a three-month waiting list on psychiatric appointments in [CITY], and I don't even know who does that [in] [rural county]. I know. It's always ever shifting."**


(*Community Partner - Domestic & Sexual Abuse*)

Based on responses from community partners, there seems to be a high need for mental health and AODA support for fathers as well as a gap in services in this area.

### ● ● RECEIVING SERVICES

Fathers with access to community resources such as self-development classes and public libraries see the value and seek them out eagerly, while other fathers that live in remote areas struggle with lack of access to these resources. In some very rural areas, fathers experience service deserts in which they not only lack the opportunity for activities with their children, but also basic services such as stores.

In addition to geographical limitations, logistical challenges such as transportation, distance to services, and not having a driver's license are all barriers to fathers' accessing services.




**"I live way out in the country in kind of in the brush where there isn't anything. I'm 45 minutes away from any Walmart or anything, or to [nearest city]. And so there's no libraries. And plus I don't have a driver's license neither. And so getting anywhere to obtain any of these special benefits like that is nearly impossible for me. So I never partook in any of them." (Father Focus Group - Legal System)**

### ● ● QUALITY, AFFORDABLE CHILD CARE

When asked specifically about gaps in services for fathers, one community partner remarked, **"I would say probably the number one is quality child care or daycare services, and maybe, you know, education about finding quality daycare and child care."** In some cases, the lack of child care relates to fathers' need for support around basic needs mentioned above, such as employment. For example, one community partner that we interviewed said, **"There is a need for child care in our county which can be a barrier for parents wishing to be employed."** (Community Partner - Family Court)

Fathers also reported limited access to daycare centers. One father reported driving one hour each way, or two hours a day, just to access a daycare center. When it comes to custody arrangements, fathers reported that they did not always feel confident standing up for their views around child care arrangements.



**"They go to a daycare center in [CITY 1] because there isn't one. There's a crisis of daycare in [CITY 2]. And I agreed to do a daycare center. And now I'm kind of like, why the heck did I do that? Because, last year, I had two teenagers watching my kids. But they were great. They had a great time with them. So now, I mean, it's two hours of driving a day, two hours. And I'm like why? Why did I do that? Why didn't I stand up for myself more? So, yeah, not standing up for myself. But that's not one of the struggles of being a father, I guess. But, in my situation right now, it's become necessary." (Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)**

The lack of access to quality or affordable child care may lead to arrangements that are costly, inconvenient, and not always in the best interest of the child or family.





## Theme 2: Parenting Support

Fathers and community partners described the need for parenting support, including education around specific topics, role modeling, and navigating unique co-parenting circumstances.

### ● ● PARENTING SKILLS AND CONFIDENCE

Some fathers described challenges around not having the right skills to feel confident in their parenting. They identified that having father-directed education around parenting skills would be beneficial or has been beneficial, if they've already participated, in the following areas:

- Helping their children learn a sense of family responsibility
- Knowledge of child development
- Positive discipline
- Preparing children for independence, further education, and vocation
- Helping kids navigate the education system when fathers did not go to school in the same state/country
- Confidence working with teachers and schools
- Learning new skills as they transition into a separation or divorce
- Raising daughters

Various fathers described the need for parenting skills and strategies that are specific to their children's developmental stages, as well as increased knowledge of child development. For example, fathers discussed the need to be patient and remain consistent with young children. Some fathers described feeling a great deal of frustration trying to parent through developmental stages. Other fathers reported finding it challenging to provide positive discipline and guidance on a consistent level that also allows for a relationship with their children that is warm, fun, and engaging.

**"...it's a fine line between being a parent, being a friend, or intermediate. So the most challenging is giving them what they want but being assertive dad ideal."**

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

**"But, when they are with me, I guess probably the biggest challenge is just sometimes not having the skills that I would like to have to be a good parent and dealing with the sibling rivalry, which has been mentioned. Sometimes I'm just not sure how to handle it. And you're just kind of stumbling around in the dark a lot of the time."**

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

Some fathers also noted that their children struggle with receiving discipline from them and then being able to transition back to having a fun and engaged relationship. Fathers reported feeling that they are perceived as a disciplinarian.

One community partner described fear or lack of confidence as a barrier to fathers getting more involved or engaged with their children: **"The fear part, I think it's that they're not going to do as well as mom would do, because mom's always done it."** *(Community Partner - Family Resource Center)*

Community partners expressed that fathers may need support around general parenting skills such as handling meltdowns, preparing for outings, and setting routines. For instance, community partners remarked that some fathers find creating structure and following a bedtime routine to be difficult.

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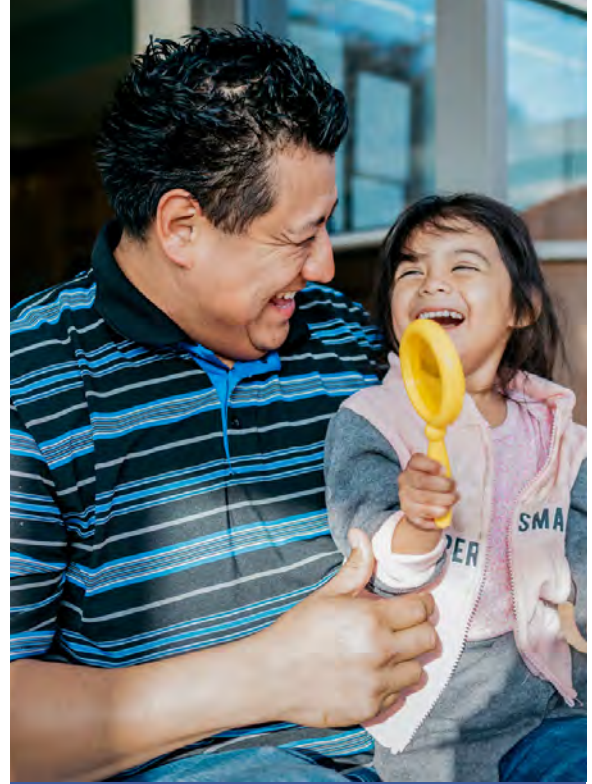
**"And it seems like fathers have the hardest time with structure in a home, routine in a home, a bedtime routine, that kids brush their teeth. Those are things that mamas think of, that daddies don't. They know they should do that. They might just say, just go brush your teeth before you go to bed. But if we have a routine that, you know, they brush their teeth, and Dad is there doing something while the kids are brushing their teeth, and tucking in bed, reading a story. I think that part is important."** *(Community Partner - Family Resource Center)*



## Q2: FATHER'S NEEDS

Fathers who have received this support expressed a desire for continued support from community partners. One provider from a family resource center described how a group of fathers who just finished a program, “want to come back and just have some touch up things on the subject of the nurturing class that they took, because they just want to have some reminders that they can keep moving forward on their relationships with their kids and handling discipline and all those kind of things.”

Some fathers expressed a sense of self-consciousness about raising daughters. These tended to be fathers who did not grow up around many females, or were single or co-parenting with female parents. These fathers discussed difficulty in understanding their daughters' needs and perspectives.



Some fathers expressed a sense of self-consciousness about raising daughters. These tended to be fathers who did not grow up around many females, or were single or co-parenting with female parents.

**FATHER 1:** “For me, I guess the most challenging thing...with me I’ve got my youngest girls. And it’s just a little challenging at times trying to [INAUDIBLE] in their shoes as females and try to understand them as females because it’s tough for me. Cause when I was growing up it was just me and two brothers. And all my cousins are boys. So it’s kind of tough getting a feel for the way of things ...”

**FATHER 2:** “For me the most challenging thing-- well, I’m a single dad with two of my kids and I’m trying to raise my daughter by myself. So that’s real hard. I don’t know how to be a girl to raise a girl.”  
(Father Focus Group - Legal System)

A community partner also commented on a more specific aspect, potty training, of fathers raising girls.

“Sometimes it’s like, when we get into the potty training stage, if it’s a single dad, how am I going to do this with a girl? You know? I say, the same way you’d probably do with a little boy except we’re just missing a couple parts, you know? And just various things like that.”  
(Community Partner - Family Resource Center)

## Q2: FATHER'S NEEDS

In some cases, fathers discussed struggling to prepare their children for independence, further education, and vocation. They also reported feeling unprepared when their children reach young adulthood and their priorities shift towards establishing themselves in the wider world, and parent relationships become a smaller focus compared to peer relationships. Fathers identified the need to let go and empower their children to make their own choices, even if those choices bring about negative consequences for their children.

For fathers, parenting during COVID-19, including virtual learning, highlighted that they may need more confidence with their parenting skills, which became evident for them when reaching out to other professionals, such as teachers, to request support for their children when they were struggling academically.

For fathers who did not speak English as their first language, they indicated that supporting their children with development from early years through post-secondary education is additionally challenging. These fathers face language barriers as well as a lack of experience with an unfamiliar education system, that is dissimilar to their own culture. Routes to support are not always clearly communicated or accessible to these fathers.

**"I think that one of the needs as a father that I have and I believe may apply to others as Hispanics is not knowing how to use computers, nowadays. How to look for that help. I think one of the things that kids are adapting a lot better to computers. But when as a parent, as a father, that we grew up in a place where computers didn't exist. It's very difficult to be able to adapt and to be able to show them, for example, due to the pandemic.**

**I don't think there were any-- there wasn't any type of help for parents to how to teach kids about school or what they're learning. And one of the things is the type of study that they have, we didn't have. Or at least not in my case.**

**So it's very difficult to adapt to that and not to be able to get help or not know where to go where we can try to receive that type of help, for example.**

**I think that's one of the needs that many Hispanic families I believe have here in the United States. That they're not being able to adapt. It's very difficult to adapt yourself to computers, because one hasn't shown you how to do that from your youth."**

*(Father Focus Group - Latino Fathers)*





From another part of the same focus group:

**"We don't know what steps have to be taken or who to reach out to or how can we help. How can they help us in regards to University or for example, there are students that gets grants. How do we get grants?"**

**Given that we didn't study here, we don't know how the system works. And we feel lost. We don't know how to support them. Because, well, the education system is different to what we received in Mexico to the education that they receive here.**

**So for us, yes it's been a challenge. A very difficult challenge to learn with her. Because we didn't study here, we didn't grow up here. We don't even know nothing about here. So yeah, this is where we feel alone. Because we don't know who to reach out to."**

*(Father Focus Group - Latino Fathers)*

A wide variety of parenting skills and support needs were identified across both focus groups with fathers and interviews with community partners. This is a high area of need, and gaps exist in parenting support that is specific to fathers and their needs.

## ● ● FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Fathers described their desire to spend quality time and build connections with their children. For instance, they reported that meeting their own basic needs can be a barrier in building relationships with their children.

**"One of my challenges is getting my own needs met because I really discovered that, if I don't get my needs met, then I'm more impatient with the kids. And that's not fair."**

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

When work obligations make fathers less physically present, fathers reported feeling concerned that their children do not seek them out and wanting to find ways to encourage this. Fathers also discussed feeling like children have a preference for their other parent over them.

**"Who does one look for when one is scared? To mom. What happens when the child requires something? They look for mom. I would love-- and that's the obstacle. That's where I say why can't I be like that? Why can't I be that? If my child needs X, Y, or Z, he looks for mom first. Why isn't he looking for me? That is where I say, where maybe they want mom more than dad."**

*(Father Focus Group - Latino Fathers)*

Fathers also want to be perceived respectfully by their children even though they may not be part of the physical structure of the same "home" environment anymore. Fathers that are in difficult life circumstances expressed diminished confidence and have felt less respect than they would like from their children. Even when time is available, they discussed that feeling connected to children can be a challenge.



**"For me, for sure, the hardest thing is just being physically distant from my boys and not getting to be with them physically. So I just feel like I'm missing a lot of the little things. And sometimes I just get really worried that I'm becoming the guy on the computer to them. And it's just kind of rough." (Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)**

Along these lines, community partners reported that unresolved issues of paternity, custody, and visitation create barriers to fathers being physically and psychologically present. One partner shared that in some cases children may blame fathers for the family separation. *This is described more in [Theme 4: Challenges and Consequences Related to the Legal System](#).*

## ● ● **ROLE MODELS**

Several community partners commented on the lack of father role models in the lives of the fathers they work with, which can make approaching parenting more challenging. They suggested that lack of general parenting knowledge and skills could be related to a lack of father role models. It is possible that there are generational impacts, such that fathers who lacked healthy parent role models growing up may not have a clear understanding themselves of what a parent, or a father, should look like or act like. They may not know what is expected from a father or why it is important to have an actively involved father in children's lives. One community partner said when referring to a father's role as parent, **"I think it [accessing services] doesn't appeal to them in the fact that they-- if they didn't know their father, they don't know how to become a father."**

Similarly, when asked about the biggest barriers that prevent fathers from being involved or engaged with their children other community partners commented:

## Q2: FATHER'S NEEDS

"The ones that I deal with, that they never had a role model, so they don't know what a good father looks like. I think that's the main thing is that they've never had a role model, so they don't know how to be a role model." (Community Partner - Correctional Facility)

"And most of it is probably lack of education, because if their dad didn't, again, it's generational, if their dad didn't interact with those kids, he's probably not going to interact with his kids." (Community Partner - Family Resource Center)

Fathers expanded on this, clarifying that even when they have gained knowledge of what to do (and not do) in their fatherhood role, they may still fall back on familiar behavior patterns from what they were exposed to as children.

"I would say that the thing that stands in my way the most-- and I know I mentioned that my father and my grandfather were in my life growing up. And they had some really great qualities. But they had absolutely no idea what they were doing. And since becoming a parent, I can see that they just had no tools. They had no knowledge, no education, no resources.

And my mom, who I have a good relationship with now, she suffered from mental illness, and just wasn't-- didn't have the ability to do the things that I know that she wanted to be able to do. So I would say the biggest thing that's standing in my way is academically I can understand what I'm supposed to be doing in my role. But I didn't have any role models.

All of the behavior that was modeled for me-- it was all the wrong behaviors. And while I know what I'm supposed to be doing, so much of the time when we react to what's going on in our homes, we draw from a place much deeper than what we know academically. And that's what was modeled for us. And all of those behaviors were wrong.

So what's standing in my way is my own inability to filter all of that-- all of those incorrect behaviors out of what I'm doing for my kids and focus on doing what I know intellectually and academically is right, and minimizing all of those parental behaviors that I know are wrong." (Father Focus Group - Full Custody)



...we draw from a place much deeper than what we know academically.



Some fathers mentioned being disconnected from extended family, such as grandfathers, in addition to their own father(s).

**“My real dad was never there. My stepdad came in when I was like, one. And he was always gone because he was a truck driver, so I didn’t really have much of a father in the influence. And then we were kind of a distant family so I never really knew my grandfather, either.”**

*(Father Focus Group - Full Custody)*

Role modeling also relates to basic needs, and as described above, not having basic needs met can prevent fathers from being more present in children’s lives.

**“You can’t afford a place to stay. You’re always moving. You know what I’m saying? And I wish somebody would have told me when I was a younger man, hey, do it this way. I’ve never had the proper guidance. I had to do-- even though I had my father around, he never took the time to instill the importance of certain moves that needed to be made as a man to secure myself stability. And so I learned later on, on my own. First, I had to figure out the streets wasn’t about nothing. He raised me in the hood, so I’m in the hood thinking that the hood is all good. And then I find out that the hood is not everything that it looks like it is from the window that I watched it from.”**

*(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*

One father described having an inconsistent relationship with his father, growing up witnessing domestic violence, and lacking positive male role models. He describes, **“it was primarily women that offered support and encouragement for me.”** Despite this, he went on to adopt children who have been through their own trauma. His intention is to **“really help them navigate the world and all of the hardship that they’re going to have...whether it’s when they are six months old or 50. Hopefully I’ll still be around when they’re 50. The relationship is a forever one.”** *(Father Focus Group - Full Custody)*

Some fathers expressed feeling positively about using the lack of an involved parent as an example of what not to do when approaching their own parenting.

**“Well, I’ll just add my father was really never in my life until my adult age. So it just-- it just feels good to do what he didn’t do. I mean, it’s not-- like, I wasn’t traumatized or nothing, but it just feels good to give back to what I’d never had.”**

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

Some fathers expressed the desire to use their experiences to help other fathers:

**“But I’m here [on this online focus group] though, you know what I’m saying. Because I don’t know, maybe I’m here because somebody else has to hear my story, and understand the situation, and do better. Because there was no one there to help me, nobody to motivate me, nobody to coach me, nobody to direct me. So hopefully, one of the guys from the group hear the footnotes of what’s been said.”**

*(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*



Some fathers described how positive relationships with male caregivers helped them to shape their vision of what kind of parent they wanted to be. Fathers recalled that these male caregivers created a space for these fathers (as young boys) to be who they wanted to be, to try new things, to experience their environment safely, and that they cared about their contributions. Fathers expressed an appreciation for the fact that their male caregivers got them involved, wanted them to learn things, and to have hands-on experiences. Fathers also discussed the positive impact this has on their relationships with their own children, and expressed a desire to make a similar impression on their children as role models in their lives.

**FATHER 1:** “My own dad and my grandfather, I appreciated them as role models because they were interested in what I had to contribute. And so I do my best to remind myself regularly, don’t get annoyed. Just focus on what the boys are doing and why they find it fascinating. So I’m hoping that over time I can help instill in them this confidence and that they’re excited about being [who] they are. I hope, selfishly, that they appreciate me for the role I played eventually.”

**FATHER 2:** “I had a good relationship with them growing up. My father, my grandfather were always involved with us. They were always fixing on cars in the house and hunting and fishing and gardening and cooking. And they always got me involved, so I always appreciated the fact that they wanted me to learn things.” *(Father Focus Group - Full Custody)*



## Q2: FATHER'S NEEDS

Fathers recognized the generational impacts of role models, such that relationships where role modeling is present continue past their own childhood and affect them as they are actively parenting their own children.

"And I think in terms of role models for father figures, I've had good men around me, again, as a blessing. I grew up in a home where I had a great relationship with my dad. If you asked him, he probably felt that he worked too hard and wasn't around the family enough, but I still felt that it was a good relationship and he instilled that work ethic that I think is important to have. I had my grandfathers around me. We spent a lot of time golfing and spent a lot of time outside in nature, and so I think that was where I get my opinion of what I want to have for my family overall. It's that space where people can live and be open with who they are and what they are. As a parent, I want to instill certain values in you, but at the same time, ultimately at the end of the day, I want to give you the keys. And I take this from my grandfather, from my dad, from my wife's side of family, even, as well. Just give you the keys so that you can go and be the best person that you want to be, ultimately."

*(Father Focus Group - Full Custody)*

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### ● ● CO-PARENTING: PARENTING THROUGH SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

#### Transitioning into a co-parenting situation

Fathers discussed facing challenges during the process of transitioning into two households or into a co-parenting situation. Following a divorce or separation, fathers discussed needing to adapt and learn new skills, including managing day-to-day tasks (e.g., cooking, managing finances, finding housing), because they are now the sole parent in their home.



Co-parenting is when two caregivers work together to raise a child when they are divorced, separated, or otherwise do not live together.

**"I guess one of the barriers is that learning how to shift your mindset in the changes that happened from being a married couple to now the kids look to you for everything when they're with you."**

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

Fathers talked about this transition being a significant adjustment. There seems to be a learning curve for some fathers when they take on the tasks that were previously handled by the other parent.

**FATHER 1: "But doctors appointments, medical bills-- she pretty much took care of all that with my job. I was gone. And so I kind of feel like a kid coming out of high school. Basically, it's kind of like just starting from scratch and learning. I didn't know my kids went to four different hospitals. You know what I mean? There's a lot of-- she took care of all that stuff. So, yeah-- for me, it's being there for them and providing."**

**FATHER 2: "It's just getting that other schedule down where now you're full-on having to take care of the appointments, or getting the clothes, or just all those things where maybe before you didn't see so much of that. But now, every day, you're having to. Like, for me, I always cooked. When I was in my marriage, I would cook. I had no problem doing that."**

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

#### Dynamics with their co-parent

Co-parenting relationships are an important factor for maintaining positive father-child relationships. Building on the previous section of transitioning into co-parenting, fathers reported a variety of concerns around navigating co-parenting relationships such as communication, decision-making, lack of trust, personality differences, and co-parent mental health concerns.

**"It's better for me now. But, in the beginning of the divorce, being on the same page, communicating with my ex-wife about whatever it was, anything. And so that definitely was a challenge and trying to keep her life as positive and consistent as possible. Those were definitely challenges."**

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

"Their mother-- that was the weird part-- she would always call and make sure that they were OK and stuff. And it's like of course they're OK. They're with their father."

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

"...And then I just get them on the weekends, or whenever mom allows me to get them. And I'm always looked at as the bad guy because I'm more of an authority figure in the eyes of the children. And the moms are like the friend." *(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*

Fathers talked about situations where they struggle to fully understand or feel concerned about how a co-parent represents them when they are not there, or steps in front of the relationship the father has with the children.

"I don't give up. I keep coming. I keep showing up. Even though mom may make it difficult for me and try to sabotage the relationship, I keep showing up. Like my sons, I haven't seen them in a while, but I'm determined..." *(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*

One community partner discussed how some fathers struggle with how to co-parent in situations where the other parent has, or tries to have, power over the relationship including children.

"I'd say about 30% of the clients that I work with are males. They're struggling with how to co-parent with an abusive controlling person, because domestic violence is about power and control, so when a victim finally does leave, the abusers can use whatever measures they can to exert control." *(Community Partner - Domestic & Sexual Abuse)*

See the [co-parent gatekeeping code](#) under [Theme 3: System Barriers to Fatherhood](#), for more discussion of co-parenting dynamics.

### Child support

Child support can be a barrier for financial stability and for fathers being the parent that they want to be. For example, fathers talked about how paying child support can prevent them from spending time with their children, or can create a situation where the father does not have any extra money to spend on the child when they do have time together.

"So basically, I had a lot of-- taken-- just like he said, 33%, or whatever it was. And I mean, it just killed me. And the kids would come over, and then-- they were 12 and 10 at the time, whatever it was, when I first got divorced. And were like oh, we want to do this and do that. And I'm like, I can't afford it. And that was very discouraging to me. They want to do this, and do this and that. Well, mom takes us to the movies. And mom does this. And I'm like, I can't. And, yeah, that's been very difficult. And that's the big thing that stood in my way with a lot of that stuff. And then, of course, they wanted to go home because I couldn't give them the luxuries that they wanted." *(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*

## Q2: FATHER'S NEEDS

"You're paying 33% of your income and you have nowhere to stay. The respect is just not there. The kids be looking like, man, dad, you're a loser. You know what I'm saying. You're a loser. And it's hard to-- it's hard to put on the image of a winner when it is evident you ride in a raggedy-- you're riding in a raggedy car."

*(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*

*These issues also overlap with fathers' desire to find better paying employment, which is detailed in the [Employment code](#) under [Theme 1: Basic Life Needs & Resources](#).*

In some cases, fathers reported feeling like children are not taken care of despite paying child support, and feel obligated to spend money on necessities or activities for children, which may create tension with the co-parent.

"It seems like I'm always spending money trying to accommodate the relationship. And that's all I've become, you know what I'm saying, the guy that takes you to the movies, takes you to the restaurant, takes you to get shoes and clothes.

And I'm paying child support. But you send my kid over here to me looking like they haven't been well kept, I'm going to send them back home looking like this is the house of love, not the house you shouldn't have sent them over here like that. Because I built my credit basically off of taking care of my kids. Like I've never had credit before. Like I've never bought a car new off the lot. I've never owned a piece of property. I've never even traveled."

*(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*

*For more detail regarding fathers navigating child support and custody arrangements, see [Theme 4: Challenges and Consequences Related to the Legal System](#).*





### Co-parents need support

Fathers reported being affected by a variety of circumstances related to their co-parenting situations, such as physical distance from children, lack of a visitation plan, not having enough resources to support children, or feeling shame that they are not in a marital relationship to support their children. Fathers expressed a need for support around co-parenting for both themselves and their children.

Fathers described struggling with the large amount of responsibility they feel being a single parent.

**"Well I'm a single father, so when I get my children it's just me and the two boys. And it's a challenge. It's a full time job so it's a challenge because there's a lot of responsibility there."**  
*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

Fathers expressed a need for support around navigating the responsibilities and uncertainty of parenting after separation from the child's other parent.

**"And so, yeah. It would be nice to have some help, like finding childcare and things like that in advance of when the boys are here. But, again, so much of that is uncertain now with the COVID that it's like I can't really get any firm commitments because I have no idea when they're going to be with me, and for how long, and just a lot of uncertainty to deal with right now. So I'm not even sure if I should be looking for help yet."**  
*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

Fathers talked about wanting tools to help with decision making, especially in complex situations, and knowing when to involve the children in family decision making. Fathers were also looking for examples of how to talk with children about these topics. They discussed seeking ways to find consistency between households with shared roles and responsibilities, as well as having a desire to work together with the co-parent to keep the children's life positive and to have both parents be viewed positively by the children.

Fathers said that the co-parenting education offered during divorce needs to be sustained or continued in some way for it to be effective.

Fathers talked about wanting tools to help with decision making, especially in complex situations, and knowing when to involve the children in family decision making.

**"I think there should be more help out there for especially dads. Because I think there's-- they send you to the class after divorce, and what you should do, but you forget. It seems like you forget all that stuff... And then...you're set out on your own. And it's just like, holy cow, like what am I going to do? And I think there should be more stuff out there for AA meetings, I guess, for dads, through divorce. Do you see that? There's probably none of that. I agree there should be more of that. That's my opinion."**  
*(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*

### ● ● FINDING SUPPORT

Fathers struggle to find resources and support around parenting topics such as children's mental health, going through a divorce, and navigating a co-parent's mental health challenges. In some cases fathers expressed wanting customized parenting support or one-on-one contact with professionals.



**FATHER 1:** "I guess I got kind of bummed. What about the needs of the kids' mental health? My ex is saying they're fine. It's not affecting them, which I'm like... She's from a divorced family. She knows it. She knows it's devastating to the kids. And just for her to lie to herself even that it's not affecting them, what resources are there to get your kids if they need to talk to somebody? Because I'm definitely not a therapist, but I do the best I can as a father. But just somebody to help walk them through this process. Is that what the guardian ad litem does or something? I don't know. This is all new to me."

**Father 2 -** "For my situation, I could use some guidance on mental health with my ex-wife. That is a primary concern right now, and it's very difficult to prove in court. And I might just have to do that route. I have a lot of concerns about it for a lot of reasons. So if there's any professional people I could talk to about that, besides my therapist, that would be really great. That's where I'm at right now in the process. Not good."

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

There are several factors that affect fathers' abilities to find this support, such as moving to a new community where they do not know how to find resources.

*For more information on fathers' barriers to accessing services see the code Fathers are Underserved in Program Development and Delivery under Theme 3: Systems Approach to Reduce Stigma and Include Fathers.*



## Theme 3: Systemic Barriers to Fatherhood

This theme illustrates the need to address systemic issues that negatively impact fathers and father-child relationships. The most prevalent subject discussed here, from both community partners and fathers, is coded as attitudes and gender norms that impact fatherhood.

### ● ● ATTITUDES AND GENDER NORMS THAT IMPACT FATHERHOOD

Gender norms in our society influence attitudes and behaviors towards fathers, and affect fathers' abilities to access needed support and services (e.g., viewing fathers as providers over caregivers). Relatedly, fathers have attitudes about themselves and other fathers that can inhibit their ability to parent and utilize services.

*See **Overarching Theme: Fathers want to be fathers** section for details on father attitudes around wanting to be involved in their children's lives.*

#### **Fathers perceived as less important than other caregivers (e.g., mothers)**

At the societal level, there is often an assumption in mother-father co-parenting situations that mothers are the primary caretaker for children which can minimize the father's role and importance in children's lives. Fathers highlighted the historical norm that during separation the mother gets the children and the father is responsible for financially supporting the family. Several of the interviews with community partners mentioned that mothers are often given priority or treated as the default parent, overlooking the value that fathers may bring and making it difficult for them to gain rights or custody of their children. Community partners also noted believing that in family court, custody arrangements are balanced in favor of mothers and that fathers' actions are often viewed more harshly than mothers in the same situation. Similarly, there are societal views that the role of the father in caring for his children is secondary, to the point that they and others view them as "babysitters."



"These are fathers that don't necessarily have custody of their kids. They feel like they're always placed in the back seat, that everything's all about the moms and the dads are left out of the talks, the picture of the situation. We hear that a lot from different dads, that it's always all about the moms."

*Community Partner -  
Family Resource Center)*

There are additional concerns when fathers approach the legal system. Some services, such as legal advocacy and support, are not equally accessible or available to fathers.

"And so oftentimes, the stereotype is that moms always get the kids and dads are left at the mercy of the mother in terms of placement and custody. So misconception, they come in thinking, they have no rights, they come in thinking the courts are automatically going to give them (moms) everything and (they) don't get nothing. And so there's some programs out there specifically for women to access legal funds but not for men."

*(Community Partner - Domestic & Sexual Abuse)*

*Issues of custody and child support are described more under [Theme 4: Issues navigating the legal system](#).*



Some services, such as legal advocacy and support, are not equally accessible or available to fathers.

### Fathers as financial providers

Fathers described the feeling of not being treated as human beings, because their worth is being defined by the money they bring to the table, more so than as a parent that can be there for their children more holistically [socially, emotionally, physically], or as a person that also has their own needs.

"You might have two breadwinners, but there's still some of that traditional role-playing that comes into play. The mom is viewed as the nurturer, and dad's the provider. And I think you just don't feel heard, so that's a barrier..."

Society wants to look at the money and what are you doing for your kids. And we're human. We have needs, as well. And I think that gets overlooked sometimes and I'm sure from the mom's side, too. Everybody falls into that. But having support around that, I saw that as a barrier early on. It just felt-- it was really hard."

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

Community partners also seemed aware of the heavy expectations placed on fathers to financially support families and to be physically present.

**"And then just because they're working so much, they can't really be at the events as much as.. And then they hear, you know, so and so is always there. And that weighs heavy on them. [One father] said he's working two jobs to make sure that his daughter can keep her braces, and will have money for a car when she turned 16, and then in college. And he's like, so I struggled, do I quit one of my jobs so I can be there with her now and then tell her we don't know she's gonna go to college? Helping them really look at what's expected of a man versus what realistically, he can do. You know, why does all of this fall on a man and if you're going to be equals in relationship with equalities?"**

*(Community Partner - Domestic & Sexual Abuse)*

Fathers reported feeling like sometimes the support for them is missing in divorce or separation, and they are left to figure out their basic security (e.g., food, shelter, job) while still being expected to financially support the children and co-parent.

**"And just by nature of our position as providers, I think that a lot of times, in that(court) process, it's like, well, you're the father. You're supposed to kind of make all this work financially... And so I think, a lot of times, there's these expectations that we're supposed to have a lot of hardship and make it easier on the other party."**

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

Fathers discussed sometimes feeling that their value as parents relates to their financial status and they extended this to how their children may view them as parents. They compared themselves negatively to new step-parents, viewing themselves as less valued and capable when they are not as financially stable.

**"I'm not taking those fun trips. Like mom lives a lifestyle that's so unreal compared to mine. You know what I'm saying? It's like, they go on trips. They hang out. They do it big. And I'm just like this old mediocre bum that comes around with the old raggedy car, picks her up, and like, hey, I'm your dad. And she's like, oh, yeah, I wish you weren't. Mom's boyfriend has everything. Mom's new husband has everything. And it's like, oh, yeah, I'd have everything too if I had all my money."**

Later in the focus group, this same father says,

**"The image that you uphold is the image that's respected. If your image doesn't look like everybody else's image, you are a nobody."**

*(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*



### LET'S DISCUSS:

How do we avoid minimizing the importance of the provider role while also allowing fathers to be more? Can fathers be providers and nurturers?

Can we acknowledge parents as individuals, step out of gender norms, and get to a place where each father and parent can choose what roles and responsibilities work best for their family?



### Gender norms, vulnerability, and help-seeking

Among fathers, these gender norms also affect how fathers relate to each other. Fathers reported barriers to seeking support such as not being able to connect with other fathers due to a belief that **"I'm not supposed to be honest about my emotions"** (*Father Focus Group - Full Custody*) and being judged for admitting they wanted help.

**"I usually have a much easier time connecting with mothers, just because they're coming from a traditionally female perspective in the world. So the times I've spent time with dads, they've been nice and it's been good. But it's really difficult to take that next step of, now we're connected socially. Because it's like, 'yeah, we were there that night. See you later.' I'm like, 'OK. I guess that's it, then.'"** (*Father Focus Group - Full Custody*)

Both fathers and community partners described how societal stigmas can make it hard for fathers to seek help and take advantage of services. This was particularly true for services that primarily serve women (e.g., domestic violence). Community partners discussed that when men do seek help in assault and domestic violence situations, they may already be in a position of desperation, or their voices are lost because they are a minority amongst women's voices.

Community partners reported that fathers might feel that it is not masculine or socially acceptable to ask for help.





It is not yet cool and manly to participate in [fatherhood programs] for a lot of people.

"It hurts my heart to hear some people that I respect and admire speak disparagingly about the people who do need and take advantage of the services. And I think some of that prevents people from taking advantage."

Later in same interview, they continue...

"It is not yet cool and manly to participate in [fatherhood programs] for a lot of people. And as a sissy man that resisted and bucked a lot of trends, I can tell you it is hard to take on that role, where you care more enough about the end result than what people are calling you or thinking about you. It is not easy." (Community Partner - Health & Human Services)

"I think sometimes our involvement with families, specifically in CPS [child protective services] or juvenile justice, you know they're not always happy with our involvement in their family. That could be one reason. But other than that, you know it could be pride. Often fathers, I think, more than anyone else are afraid to ask for help. They want to do things on their own. You know and it's a little bit more difficult, I think, for a father to ask for help than it is for a mother." (Community Partner - Health & Human Services)

Similarly, one father who had faced homelessness discussed wanting dignity and independence and not wanting to rely on others for support. After another father in the same focus group offered his basement as a living space, he said:

"I promise all I need is a good job, man. If I could work my way out of my situation, that's all I want to do, man. I appreciate the offer of kindness of giving me a place to stay. And I've been there. I've stayed with people, man. And I just want my own. You don't feel like a man living in somebody else's home, man. It's not the way I want to live. I want to live standing on my own two feet, not crawling around on my knees." (Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)

Fathers in another focus groups described fathers feeling confident and not wanting help, or not wanting to be judged or "called out:"



**FATHER 1:** "Well, I think they feel that they're confident enough to do it..."

**FATHER 2:** "They don't really-- they don't want to get help. They think they're fine."

**FATHER 1:** "Don't want to be judged."


**FATHER 2:** "Yeah, yeah. They don't want to be judged, you know? They don't want to be-- they don't want to be called out on their bullshit." *(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

Fathers also reported stigmas around seeking support for their mental health. One father asked, "why not take advantage of [counseling]?" and described "getting over that hump of, oh, I don't want people to think I needed this. It's perfectly OK just to want it and then consistently go back." *(Father Focus Group - Full Custody)*

It is not only that these views and norms affect fathers' utilization of services, but these views can also affect men's ability to be an emotionally available father. One community partner said that one of the biggest barriers to fathers being involved or engaged with their children is that "men don't feel like they can be emotional."

### Stereotypes about fathers

Society holds multiple harmful stereotypes about fathers, such that they are not nurturing or involved in their children's lives, despite research showing that fathers are more involved in caregiving than ever before. Some fathers reported believing that most fathers fit into these negative stereotypes, while simultaneously reporting that fathers are not appreciated enough.



"For some reason, I feel like fathers are not getting the appreciation they should for what they do. Because 99% of the fathers are what the stereotype is. You can't lie about that. I mean, I've seen-- I've seen it from good and the bad. And I've only seen a few good, so I mean, I can't complain or lie about it. Not a lot of us out here that are willing to do what we're doing right now, unfortunately - taking them to the school, doctors, pre-school, brushing their teeth, feeding them, bathing them.

Instead of just going to the bar, hanging out with your buddies, watching a football game, [you're] cooking dinner, tending to your children. It's a full-time job. You can't take a day off. You can't call in sick, you know? [LAUGHS]. That's how I feel. But there [are] some fathers out there that are willing to do it." *(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*



### LET'S DISCUSS:

Many fathers are not organized into networks together. Fathers are not brought up to come together around their "dad-ness" in the same way mothers are encouraged to come together around their "mom-ness." Societal attitudes can be synonymous with father attitudes, because that is the water fathers swim in. If fathers are given the opportunity to expand their networks, they may be able to broaden their definition of fatherhood and change their own expectations and assumptions of fathers.

## Q2: FATHER'S NEEDS

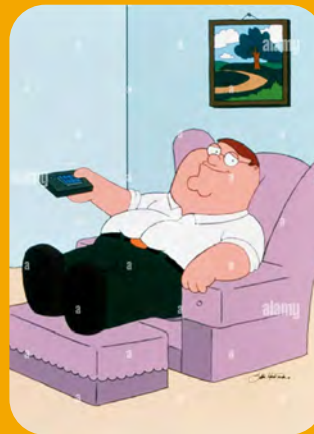
When asked about what barriers prevent fathers from seeking their services, some community partners revealed their own negative attitudes or beliefs about fathers, such as claiming them to be “emotionally unskilled” or “alcoholics.”

Despite the pervasive attitudes described above, one community partner highlighted the positive changes that have been made in this area:

**“I think that advances have been made that are fantastic. I love seeing the trend toward stay-at-home dads. I love seeing that more and more dads are okay being parents and gentle and nurturing and loving.”** (Community Partner - Health & Human Services)

### LET'S DISCUSS:

One of the most common ways father stereotypes are perpetuated is through media portrayals of fathers who are uninvolved, uninterested, or incompetent. This is commonly known as the “bumbling dad” trope. How can we push back against this and create a new vision of what fathers can be (and already are)?



### Judging fathers who have served their time

Fathers involved in the criminal legal system, particularly those that have committed felonies, mentioned that there are ongoing consequences post-incarceration. They reported feeling that the perception from the rest of society is that the sentence was not restorative and so these men must still serve the consequences and cannot be trusted. This is evident in a lack of access to social housing as well as limited access to other social programs.

**“And being a felon also, I feel shunned. I feel like it's a problem if we ask for help.”**

The same father describes, later in the focus group...

**“What would make me feel welcome? Knowing that my criminal history doesn't bar me, or exempt me from help, or knowing that I'm not going to be judged based on my past. Who I was isn't who I am. Do you guys know \_\_\_\_\_? He's a person that made me feel welcome. He's welcomed us with open arms and was trying to offer us any and all help that he could instead of, 'well, your record might bar you from this.'”** (Father Focus Group - Legal System)



Fathers involved in the criminal legal system also recalled times when they were accepted and not judged by others, noting that it made a big difference for them. These people made them feel welcomed, helped them, and motivated them to look forward while still being honest about the challenges they might face as a result of their record.


### ● ● FATHERS ARE UNDERSERVED IN PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT OR OUTREACH

Across both community partners and fathers, there is recognition that fathers' needs are not always considered when programs are created, marketed, or delivered. For program creation and delivery, community partners realize that their service approach treats fathers as an afterthought. There are parenting services and supports that exist, but they are not designed for fathers, highlighting a need for father-specific programming. One partner from a County Health & Human Services succinctly stated, **"I don't think there really are services specific for dads."** Another partner from a Domestic & Sexual Abuse agency said, **"There's just so much that isn't explicitly for or maybe only for [fathers.] They're like an afterthought**

**or add on, because we serve everyone."** One community partner remarked that there is a gap in parenting education for fathers and another was struck by how a parenting program she observed was clearly directed towards mothers. Yet another said there is a gap in services for fathers who are no longer partnered with their children's mother or other parent.

Indeed, fathers reported feeling marginalized when it comes to mainstream programming; they feel programming for their children is dominated by mothers. Fathers discussed times that they have participated despite this, noting that it highlighted their situation as single parents and they started to question why there are not more fathers involved from a variety of family experiences.

There are parenting services and supports that exist, but they are not designed for fathers, highlighting a need for father-specific programming.

 **FATHER 1 - "Definitely having peer groups to talk to would have been helpful for me. I am sure I looked for it. It seems like the dad role gets marginalized a little bit. Even still, when I try to get involved with my daughter's school, it's all the moms."**

**FATHER 2 - "And it's like, what's going on? You know, are the dads not involved because they're still together? I don't know." (Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)**

One community partner shared how there is no father programming at a local jail. Similarly, some of the fathers who were incarcerated during the focus group reported that they were not aware of any parenting programs and described the prison lock down through the pandemic as a further

## Q2: FATHER'S NEEDS

barrier. Further, there are services, such as housing support, that are disproportionately inaccessible to fathers, especially when the parents are not in a relationship. One community partner discussed the intersection of lack of affordable housing, less resources available for fathers, and less involvement with children:

**"Fathers often become homeless as a result of the ending of a relationship. They don't perceive themselves as homeless because they're staying with somebody or they're couchsurfing or something. But when they try to access what very limited housing assistance there is, those are for women, or women with children."**

**In one case we had, the family decided, dad would go stay with somebody else and then mom and the kids would go into this shelter for three months. Thereby during this time of crisis with the family, dad's being pulled away from, which to the kids was translating to dad somehow caused this, that's why he doesn't get to stay with us. And you can't have overnight visits if they're gonna be sleeping in your car, same with your buddies."**

*(Community Partner - Domestic & Sexual Abuse)*

There is a recognition by community partners that they are not doing specific promotion to fathers; they are relying on mothers to bring fathers or just hoping fathers will just turn up. Some service providers that we interviewed recognized a need for more intentional marketing for fathers, especially towards those who can really make use of the programming -- **"the people that could use the most support aren't the ones that tend to show up."** *(Community Partner - K-12 School)*

One community partner shared their perspective on this: **"Maybe we need to reach out more to the dads, because we always reach out to moms. I know that's like double the work, but maybe if**

**We just need to make them feel like they're a part of the family, too. And even though the courts don't always make them feel that way, we have to be able to get them so they're comfortable in their parenting skills, too.**



## Q2: FATHER'S NEEDS

**we reached out to the dad as well as the mom, so that he felt like he's just not the tag-along, that he's equally important."** *(Community Partner - Family Resource Center)*

A different partner shared their perspective on more intentionally trying to reach fathers:

**"We just need to make them feel like they're a part of the family, too. And even though the courts don't always make them feel that way, we have to be able to get them so they're comfortable in their parenting skills, too. So I mean, I think if we had more dads that took advantage of like either Triple-P or nurturing [parenting programs], I think that would be helpful. So I think we just need to somehow figure out how to get them to come in here."** *(Community Partner - Family Resource Center)*

Among fathers, some knowledge of support exists, but they reported that understanding how to access information around services, programs, and resources is not straightforward or easy. In some cases, services are there but are not responsive or timely. Significant barriers exist for fathers accessing services and programs, such as limited hours and language.

In terms of school-related activities, there is a perception by community partners that fathers are uncomfortable and out of place at these events.

**"I sometimes think, like school activities, that dad does not feel comfortable walking in by himself, because usually, it's all moms at some of those daytime school activities. And I think that dad is uncomfortable walking in by himself, finding a place, you know, to sit, or who to sit by, what to do."** *(Community Partner - Family Resource Center)*

Relatedly, one father spoke about his experiences getting involved in his children's schooling:

**"Getting involved in school, I did try. It's not easy. It's not-- it took me two or three weeks for any school announcements that you get through text or phone, I had to almost bother them to get that to me now. And it's a struggle."** *(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*







As a result of the pandemic, fathers started thinking more about their communication with their children's school(s). This included understanding what their children were doing, how they were doing, and how to access more support and help. These were previously viewed as tasks that mothers were more in-tune with, and some fathers still feel disconnected from this process.

**"Especially right now since school has been off, the kids have been doing distance learning, I can only speak for my daughter in that there definitely has not been enough schoolwork given. It highlighted the point that, in the schools, the moms always seem to be very in tune with what's going on-- some sort of resource to help us know what they're doing in school, or who to talk to at the school, or what you can do at home with them to help them with their reading, math, whatever it is, and certain resources that revolve around that so that they know that we're there as a resource for them to help them with their schoolwork. During COVID, my daughter would do her work, but I didn't always take the time to add things to it."**  
*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

The lack of communication with fathers about children extends beyond schooling. Some fathers reported feeling like they are the last to know about their children's needs, even when it comes to very serious issues.

**"I just got my kids back out of foster care because I let them see her[their mom]. And next thing you know, she goes and-- she goes and does something crazy. Next thing you know, they end up in foster care. I didn't even know till like three days. It was over the weekend."**  
*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*



## LET'S DISCUSS:

How do we include fathers in ongoing or regularly available programming and services? Do we see fathers as a target audience, contributor, or member of community spaces and services? Are we willing to make fathers a priority?

### ● ● SERVICE PROVIDER OR PROGRAM CHALLENGES

Among community partners, there is confusion around who is offering services, including both mandatory and non-mandatory programs, and confusion about what happens when needed services end. There is also a lack of clarity about who provides speciality services. One community partner described how the burden should not be on fathers to learn about programs and services, but on organizations to be more proactively expanding their membership and influence. This partner also described how there **“isn’t a really good clearinghouse of all the resources that focus on fathers”** and how,

**“We, as a group of experts, don’t know where to go for most of the answers. Sometimes our cases are so unique that we dealt with it three years ago, and we don’t remember who did that or they’re not even in this county anymore or the city. Even the people that are grooming people coming out of prison, often, they don’t know what resources there are.”**  
(Community Partner - Health & Human Services)

**Organizations struggle with limited resources such as general funding, not enough staff to build or maintain programs, lack of time due to caseload and other programming needs, or lack of dedicated funding for father-based programming. One community partner described how their high caseload means that “we’re not able to spend as much time as we would like with the fathers. And they need more time.”**  
(Community Partner - Health & Human Services)

Service providers described how limited general funding can prevent them from adding new initiatives unless they can find a funder that wants to work specifically with fathers. Similarly, fathers recognized that it would be beneficial if some systems had more resource investment, and that this might help increase the capacity of the supportive services they provide (e.g., family court services, language access services).

**“It would be nice to really bring in money for the family court and supportive service processes.”** (Father Focus Group – Shared Custody)

Community partners reported that in some cases, there is no access to community-based services that can specialize in areas of need. One community partner with Health & Human Services in northern Wisconsin said that there are no organizations they can contract with to offer additional services - **“they’re just not in this area.”** Another from a domestic and sexual abuse agency in a different part of Wisconsin described how their domestic violence court got disbanded because there was no one providing anger management, which was part of the requirement for counseling and treatment. **“The waiting list was six months or beyond”** for anger management services which were still over an hour away. This same provider was not aware of any psychiatric services in their county and mentioned a three-month waiting period for psychiatric appointments available in a neighboring county.

Community agencies recognized that increasing the number of male service providers may increase the likelihood of fathers engaging in their services: **"we don't have many men in the field."** (*Community Partner - Children's Well-Being Coalition Member*)

Further, some community partners find it challenging that their agency is known for implementing consequences, such as for not paying child support. They acknowledged that if they do not engage in changing the community perspective of their services, it will remain difficult to engage fathers and their families.

We're here to help  
- not just to throw  
people in jail. This is a  
change from the way  
it used to be.

**"We're here to help - not just to throw people in jail. This is a change from the way it used to be. We used to be seen as an agency that would throw people in jail for not paying. We still have to do that in some situations. But we know that nothing changes if that's all we do."**  
(*Community Partner - Child Support*)

## HIRING AND WORKPLACE

Employers' recognition of paternal involvement in caring for children is not reflected in workplace policies or flexibility. This creates barriers for fathers in scheduling time for children and family. This is acknowledged by community partners as well as fathers. For example, one interviewee said, **"If an employer does not allow time off, this can be challenging for a father to be involved."** (*Community Partner - Domestic & Sexual Abuse*)

This extends to practical concerns about fathers being able to leave work to care for children. One interviewee from Health & Human Services mentioned the need for flexibility to **"eliminate that fear of losing your job when you have to leave work because your child has the flu, or they have to be picked up from childcare or school."** Similarly, one father reported being required to work excessive hours and repeatedly explaining to employers that they need to be with their children.

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**"They're always wanting me to work more and more hours. They're always want[ing] me to take time away from my daughters. And I explain to them 100,000 times-- I'm like, look, I got to be there for my daughters just as much as I got to be there for my job."**  
(*Father Focus Group - Full Custody*)





Employers may have policies or standards that discriminate against some fathers and prevent them from accessing gainful employment because of their previous involvement with the legal system or because fathers look or act a certain way.

**“There are people that cannot get jobs because employers have a very strict policy of not hiring folks with a background. Or there are employers that truly will say ‘they look like they probably have committed a crime.’ And so there’s still a lot of societal crap that needs to be overcome with the gatekeepers, the folks that have risen up in the ranks and are maybe in a senior role in hiring or business ownership or HR or what have you, that have, I guess, antiquated ways of thinking or haven’t yet had the experience with a successful hire of someone who really has transformed their life.”**

*(Community Partner - Health & Human Services)*

## ● ● CO-PARENT GATEKEEPING

Both community partners and fathers highlighted common experiences of co-parents withholding children from contact with fathers due to a variety of circumstances (e.g., disagreements over child support or visitation arrangements). In fatherhood work, this issue is often termed “maternal gatekeeping” and in our evaluation community partners and fathers were almost always referencing mothers. However, in acknowledging a wide variety of possible family compositions, we refer to this code as “co-parent gatekeeping” instead. One community partner shared that when a non-custodial parent **“finally does attempt to reconcile or reunify, they run into that resistance that ‘until you pay up [child support], you’re not going to see your kids.’”** *(Community Partner - Health & Human Services)*

Non-custodial fathers indicated that in some circumstances they only get to see their children when the other parent allows. They reported that at times their co-parents do not respect, value, or may even unconsciously place the interactions fathers have with children as less important than children's responsibilities at the co-parent's home or priorities that the co-parent has for the child (e.g., chores, consequences).

Similarly, some fathers discussed viewing their relationship, or the lack thereof, with their children's other parent as standing in the way of being the father they want to be.




**FACILITATOR:** "What is standing in your way, if anything, of being the kind of parent you want to be?"

**FATHER:** "Mine was the other parent. We're not together so our personal problems became a barrier between myself and my children-- my children's mother.

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*


In some cases, fathers talked about co-parents withholding access to children as a result of COVID-19 and the corresponding stay-at-home orders. These actions were not communicated or agreed upon with the fathers in those situations, so fathers were left shocked, without recourse and in many cases with little to no tools for resuming contact with their children.



"Well, one of my biggest problems was, because of this corona problem [COVID-19 pandemic], my ex-wife wouldn't let me see my kids for three months. Then I was just getting mad and mad and mad. Then I finally just lost it. I'm in this one program called MRT. And the lady called me out on something and I blew up on her. Then, the next thing you know, I'm in trouble. And then right after that, then the stay-at-home thing got lifted, and after that, you know, my attitude and everything I had attitude about was gone because I finally got to see my kids."

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

Fathers reported that co-parents are reluctant to allow fathers struggling with addiction to be involved with their children. Once fathers are able to show the ability to be sober and hold down responsibility (e.g., housing, jobs), then co-parents are more likely to consider allowing fathers contact with their children.



"I'm doing all these programs. And since I've been doing that-- you know, I'm not all messed up anymore on drugs. So she [children's mother] started coming around finally. I started talking to her finally. But before that, she wouldn't even say nothing to me. But since I've been, you know, straightening out my act and holding down my job and paying child support, and you know, just showing her that I'm making enough and straightening out my life, she's starting to come around now. Things are a little bit easier, it seems like, than what it used to be."

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

Relatedly, fathers reported feeling like extended family, such as grandparents, can be a negative influence in the marital relationship, which may later influence the father-child relationship.

**"I wasn't always the man that she thought her daughter would marry...she finally got my ex-wife to leave me. I think she had a lot to do with my kids and everything, leaving me."**

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*



### LET'S DISCUSS:

How do we get all parents to recognize the importance of children spending time with both co-parents, and in both home settings? Mothers or other co-parents may not always understand the benefits of father involvement for their children's well-being, and increasing awareness of this may reduce gatekeeping.

## ● ● SYSTEMIC INEQUALITIES

Throughout the focus groups, fathers described a variety of systemic inequalities that serve as barriers to filling their fatherhood role, including but not limited to racism, mass incarceration, and intergenerational inequality.

Fathers who are involved in the criminal legal system feel like they are up against a system that is not invested in their successful reintegration to society. They shared their beliefs that in Wisconsin, once someone is in the criminal legal system, the system wants you to stay there. Fathers involved in the legal system reported feeling that the odds are against them, especially when they are dealing with personal struggles like addiction. One father described how incarceration is preventing him from "leading by example" for his child, and other fathers in the focus group built on what he said:

**FATHER 1: "I mean incarceration is a big problem. And the reason I keep getting incarcerated is because of my addictions."**

**FATHER 2: "And it's not just incarceration, it's Wisconsin. You cross the street you're going to be on PS [probation suspension]. They'll keep you incarcerated for as long as you-- Wisconsin is people farming. Look, there's 34 prisons in the state of Wisconsin. You look at Minnesota, they got like 12. And it's just Wisconsin is so ridiculous when it comes to...80% of Wisconsin prison system are reoffenders. That means we have a 20% chance of making it once we hit the street. So I mean, the odds are against us. There's a lot that stands in our way."**

**FATHER 3: "Yeah. They talked me into signing my papers. I thought I was going to get out. And I ended up getting four times as much time as I had originally. And I'm going to prison-- wow."**

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

Fathers also described issues around racism that influence their fatherhood roles. As a member of an underrepresented group, one father discussed how he feels misunderstood when he does try to reach out for help. Fathers reported regularly being judged unfairly and that their skin color





I've leaned on several different resources. I've had places help me pay my rent at certain times. I've had places help me repair my car. I've had places help me further my education, pay for my tuition.

interferes with them being a father and showing up for their children. Two fathers involved in the legal system described:



**FATHER 1:** "I look like a terrorist and I'm black and white. And so I get looked at negatively trying to be a father anyway because of my skin color. "Oh, you're a father? OK." It's hard to explain. When you're a minority, you feel different entering places, trying to ask for help. People just think that you're looking for a handout and it's like, no, I just want a little bit of help."

**FATHER 2:** "I can relate to that." (*Father Focus Group - Legal System*)

Issues of intergenerational inequality also emerged from the data. Even fathers who work several jobs, have obtained higher education, and who seek support, but came from disadvantaged backgrounds still continue to struggle with housing, transportation, and being the fathers they want to be. One father who has an associate's degree in criminal justice described:



"I've leaned on several different resources. I've had places help me pay my rent at certain times. I've had places help me repair my car. I've had places help me further my education, pay for my tuition. One year, I went to school and my PO grant didn't cover enough. And I owed maybe \$2,000. And the Young Dads group gave me maybe \$1,800, and I had to come up with the other two to get back in school." (*Father Focus Group - Non-custodial*)



## LET'S DISCUSS:

We know that systemic inequalities exist for fathers navigating the legal system. There are places within the legal system where fathers are not supported and offender perceptions are a barrier for some fathers which can lead to recidivism and relapse. What if programs were specifically designed to help incarcerated fathers learn about the research on father-child engagement and the reduced likelihood of reoffending when incarcerated fathers establish and maintain relationships with their children? Would this help fathers build stronger relationships with their children and to be more successful upon re-entry?

This section outlined major systemic issues that interfere with fathers' roles in their children's lives and illustrated why fathers are underserved by programs and services that support parents and families. In our next section, we will dig deeper into issues specifically related to fathers interfacing with the legal system.



## Theme 4: Challenges and Consequences Related to the Legal System

Fathers in a variety of situations (e.g., divorce, criminal matters) interact with the legal system. Our most prevalent finding in this theme is that fathers experience difficulty navigating the legal system in a variety of ways. These interactions with the legal system can have impacts on father-child relationships, such that time spent together is limited when fathers are incarcerated or have limited custody or visitation with their children.

### ISSUES NAVIGATING THE LEGAL SYSTEM

Fathers shared many barriers and frustrations around navigating legal systems and the impacts they have on their parenting and father-child relationship. Fathers often reported feeling disempowered and sometimes even not knowing where to start.

There is a need for education and advocacy for fathers who are going through the court system regarding their rights, how to work with the legal system, and where to go for legal advice in order to ensure that the best interest of the child is being served.

There is a need for education and advocacy for fathers who are going through the court system regarding their rights, how to work with the legal system, and where to go for legal advice in order to ensure that the best interest of the child is being served. There also needs to be more father-supportive programming that helps fathers to get the resources and help they need prior to being in a crisis.

### Legal system attitudes and historical patterns

When applied through the lens of the legal system, the negative societal view of fathers can impact child placements, visitation, and custody arrangements. There is a perception by fathers and community partners that courts place a greater emphasis on mother-child connections than they do on father-child connections. Fathers' status and role can be seen as secondary to that of the mother, or in instances of incarceration, as almost non-visible. The system often interacts with fathers solely based on their offense without consideration for the role they play in their children's lives. Fathers often believe that mothers will get primary custody of the children and that they are left out of the decision making process.

Several community partners described how the historical and current reality of the legal system favoring mothers over fathers interferes with fathers learning and advocating for their legal rights.

**"I think a lot of dads still believe that judges give children to moms no matter what the situation is, even when moms...might not be the best home for kids."**

*(Community Partner - Health & Human Services)*

**"It really is-- that is a big hole in the state, you know helping fathers through the court process. And seems the court leans more toward, you know, supporting mom." (Community Partner - Health & Human Services)**

For more findings on how society views fathers and their roles, see [Attitudes and Gender Norms that Impact Fatherhood](#).



### LET'S DISCUSS:

These findings highlight the need for the judicial system to: 1) consider fathers' unique contributions to children's development and well-being; 2) be aware of placing a higher value on mothers' efforts and contributions; and 3) not automatically use a father's criminal record as a basis for future behavior.

### Legal counsel and support

The complexity of the legal system leads to fathers putting trust in the legal professionals who work within it, since few people understand it well enough themselves. Some fathers reported feeling that even when they believe they understand the plan that legal professionals have shared with them, they end up with a different outcome and this can have significant impacts for them and their families.

There may also be a lack of understanding around what kind of support some resources (e.g., lawyers) are capable of offering. If fathers had a better understanding of this then they may be more capable of getting the support they need at the right time, from the right places, and the right people or systems.





It would have been great to have a mentor or somebody that could kind of guide you through it and say I know you're going to have these moments of real frustration. If you have an email or something, don't send it to your attorney. Send it to me, and I'll help you with that.

**"...I would have loved to have had a peer group of other dads...to have other dads in there that were in the position that I'm in now where I can now....It would have been great to have a mentor or somebody that could kind of guide you through it and say I know you're going to have these moments of real frustration. If you have an email or something, don't send it to your attorney. Send it to me, and I'll help you with that. Just little things like that. But I just didn't know. And I was very emotional at the time. And my daughter was only 1. It was all really hard." (Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)**

Many of the community partners we interviewed noted that many fathers are in need of support to navigate the layered legal system they are involved in, such as custody and placement, child support, the best interest of the child, and criminal legal issues. Community partners highlighted the value of helping fathers understand the purpose of court-ordered programming, such as co-parenting, as opportunities for accessing support as opposed to barriers that prevent them from accessing their children.

Regarding a court-ordered "Children in the Middle" [co-parenting] educational program, a community partner described:


**"Sometimes they come very angry...they don't understand why they need to be there, but the real purpose is to prevent them from taking on additional expenses and learning how to use your communication skills, your brain skills, understanding that being upset does not, you know, work very well for communication." (Community Partner - Health & Human Services)**

## **Self-representation**

Time with children is complicated by a lack of access to legal services that are within the father's means. Obtaining legal counsel can cost more than many fathers can afford, so some fathers choose to represent themselves in court.

Self-representation does not usually lead to favorable results, according to fathers who have shared these experiences. In these situations, fathers feel that courts look upon them unfavorably and give the mothers more leeway when they have the legal support to present a better case. Fathers

reported feeling like their inability to represent themselves with formal legal counsel is perceived as a lack of preparation by the judicial system, and that the courts may even consider these fathers as disinterested in their children's welfare.




**"I come into the courtroom representing myself, because I can't afford legal assistance. And so when I come in by myself, I'm already nervous as all outdoors. It's like-- it's not a familiar playground to me. So when I start to speak, if I don't sound clear, and if I don't sound confident, the judge takes that and uses it-- uses it in his favor, and just dismisses the whole case. When he says the conversation is done, the conversation is done. I don't care what little envelopes or pieces of paper I got in my hand that I want to present to him, when it's done, it's done." (Father Focus Group - Non-custodial)**

Fathers discussed feeling like their rights and perspectives are not considered during court processes. They are overwhelmed with the incoming wave of financial burden that separation and divorce brings and are trying to mitigate these costs to help keep their family afloat and surviving.

### Visitation

Another major area of concern for fathers is physical contact with their children on a clear and consistent basis. Fathers feel frustrated when courts require visitation plans to be put in place, but there is no one to regulate them once the court withdraws. Regardless of physical placement and custody agreements, many fathers are impacted by gatekeeping from the co-parent. As noted earlier, homework, chores, other family routines, and even consequences for the child are examples of things that can be used by co-parents to disrupt the visitation schedule.



**"With only getting her for limited amounts of time, whenever she's allowed to come over, because sometimes when it's time for me to have visitation, it's, oh, you got to clean your room, or you didn't do your homework, you got to watch your brother, stuff like that. And it interferes with my parenting time. But the court system is kind of slow. When you go to the court system, they put these rules in play, but they don't enforce them." (Father Focus Group - Non-custodial)**

Fathers reported having no immediate recourse for holding the co-parent accountable aside from potentially engaging law enforcement and hoping that this is not traumatic for or resented by the child. The social-emotional impact for fathers also has significant implications in their day-to-day lives, yet fathers shared that there does not seem to be the same level of consideration offered back to them in these situations.

Fathers discussed feeling like the court system does not value regular and consistent contact with both parents. Some fathers lose contact completely for periods of time, often due to situations that are indirectly related or even unrelated to the care of their children. Fathers discussed the implementation and use of "no-contact" orders and how they interfere with them seeing their children. Fathers expressed frustration and confusion when they reflected on these experiences and how powerless they feel trying to advocate on their own behalf.



**"...my other son, his mother took him away from me at three months old. At three months [old], I hadn't seen him. I had a slight relationship with him up until three, but it just got messy. The court system, I didn't have a lot of money, and she had family support, and she had finances that allowed her to ultimately take him from me and keep him from me."**

*(Father Focus Group - Non-custodial)*

**There's a 'no-contact' [Order] with the wife because of a domestic dispute. That was like four years ago. And then I got resentenced and the judge gave permission to the POs [probation officers] to put the no contact back in place. As soon as he said that, they did. So I can't see my wife. I can't be with my children."**

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

Both fathers and community partners discussed challenges that fathers face in visitation and handling supervised contact.

It can be difficult for fathers to find people in their support network who are willing to offer their unpaid time to supervise visits. Finding an available and appropriate person, coordinating everyone's schedules, and feeling comfortable interacting with one's children while a stranger observes are all examples of barriers to fathers seeing their children.

**"Eventually, hopefully, I can find a chaperone to chaperone the children and me. And I don't know anybody to do that right at hand. So that's delaying the process of me seeing my children. And I'm really upset about that. And they're so beautiful." (Father Focus Group - Legal System)**



Unless otherwise engaged with essential community services, such as child protection or probation, most fathers that have court-ordered supervised contact need to find their own visit supervisor. While a visit supervisor typically does not have to be a professional, both parents must agree to the person and the supervisor must follow all safety rules of supervised visitation. Supervised contact is not overseen by the court. Professional agencies can provide contact supervisors, but private companies may charge a fee for time and services.



Community partners described additional challenges related to visitation such as difficulties establishing visitation in the first place, how the burden is on fathers to pursue visitation and contact, and how working can interfere with visitation schedules.



**FACILITATOR:** "What are the major issues or concerns that you hear about from fathers in the community?"


**COMMUNITY PARTNER:** "Fathers' rights regarding visitation and contact with the child. When they don't have visitation rights already established at paternity, the process is long and involved. It should be possible to review the issue of visitation in an easier way than filing a motion. There are huge obstacles. If they don't keep pushing it, it gets dropped. It's assumed that it's up to the mother." *(Community Partner - Child Support)*

**FACILITATOR:** "What are the biggest barriers that prevent fathers from being involved or engaged with their children? You mentioned they feel like they're being put in the back seat, they don't have custody."

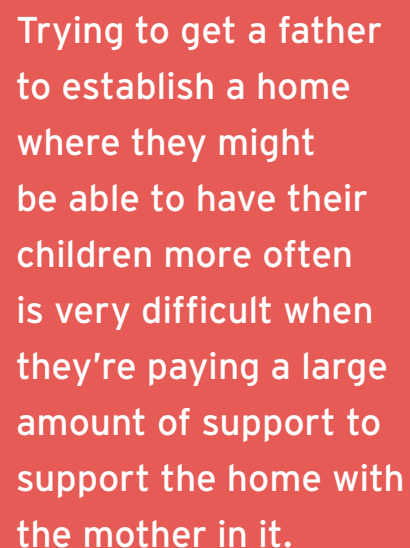
**COMMUNITY PARTNER:** "A lot of that comes from the court system. They always-- well, most times--choose the moms over the dads to have the main custody. And then there's always the--even if the kids are in foster care, they have to adhere to a certain schedule for visitation, and that doesn't always work into their work schedules. And there is a lot, and I don't even know where to begin to figure that out." *(Community Partner - Family Resource Center)*

### Child support

For fathers who are ordered to pay child support or maintenance, it can feel so overwhelming, unrealistic, and broad reaching that fathers clearly identified it as a barrier to them being more involved with their children. There are ramifications of not paying child support, and many fathers do not understand child support or are not able to pay it. Fathers are desperate for courts to understand this struggle, to listen to their concerns, and to help them create balance in the family structure so that they have a greater chance of being a consistent, stable presence in their children's lives, as well as to contribute to the total well-being of their family.



"Child support should be for those absentee fathers, not for failed relationships, is kind of one of the jests that I think we hear often. Trying to get a father to establish a home



Trying to get a father to establish a home where they might be able to have their children more often is very difficult when they're paying a large amount of support to support the home with the mother in it.



I'm supposed to be able to out work my storm. I'm not supposed to be stuck in it for life.

**where they might be able to have their children more often is very difficult when they're paying a large amount of support to support the home with the mother in it."**  
*(Community Partner - Health & Human Services)*

Fathers provided real examples of how maintaining child support payments often creates long term financial instability that is next to impossible for low income fathers to overcome for the duration of a child support order.

**"I think I'm making \$8 an hour after I get the 33% taken away. And even if you work time and have overtime-- for three years, I worked 70 hours a week. And then when I put my money in the bank, and I saved my money up, I saved up to \$5,000, do you know child support came and took it all. It was like-- I have the letters of hardship. It's like I want to talk to somebody who makes decisions and can change the way they do things. Because it's not fair. I'm supposed to be able to out work my storm. I'm not supposed to be stuck in it for life."**

*(Father Focus Group - Non-custodial)*

Despite their struggles to meet child support demands, many fathers are critical of whether their children benefit enough from child support. In some situations, this does not change even when the co-parent's request for child support increases incrementally over time. Fathers seemed frustrated as they talked about seeing their children lacking in basic necessities or experiencing a diminished quality of life. This did not always relate to significant abuse or neglect concerns, but rather differing values between co-parents regarding cleanliness or dressing standards that were apparent at time of contact exchange.


**"And so with no financial stability, I'm supposed to be able to be a parent and spend time with my kids, and my kids come home to me looking like they don't have anything. And I try to send them- I try to make sure they look decent going to school."**

*(Father Focus Group - Non-custodial)*

In general, fathers reported feeling like their efforts to care or provide for their families, both through child support and otherwise, are not recognized.

### Establishing paternity

One community partner described how establishing biological paternity up-front could reduce confusion and contribute to fathers feeling empowered and being seen as equal contributors to their children's lives.



**"Paternity is kind of an issue that we see, that maybe either paternity not getting established right away or established administratively, not biologically through genetic testing. I think if we could change the world, I'd want every kid genetically tested, even the marital children-- even though that's not going to happen.**


**But sometimes we'll have parents sign a voluntary paternity acknowledgment right at the hospital because everything's going great. Three, four months later, they're clearly not the dad. And yet. So we're trying to scramble months and years later. And then we're adding a new father into the mix. And what do we do with this other father? And so I think paternity, if they're established as the legal and biological parent from the outset, I think that they would all feel empowered with their rights as the parent.**

**I think a lot of the arguments are like, oh, you're not the dad. Or, you know, I think that comes up a lot. So I think they should be seen as an equal parent to the mom from the get go."**

*(Community Partner - Child Support)*

### Revising legal agreements

Overburdened court systems can be slow to respond when co-parents file for changes. Some fathers reported investing a great deal of time and resources into improving the situation and advocating for their father-child relationships. Other fathers find themselves waiting until parenting plan concerns are getting out of control to try making changes, or just accepting the reality of the situation and doing the best they can, even if it means sacrificing the quality and quantity of time with their children. Fathers described challenges around working long hours or not being able to take time off work to attend court dates.



**"Good luck getting a day off with the job, because 9 times out of 10, my job doesn't want to let me go to court because they need me at work. And you play that game for so many times, for so many years, until you just get tired of playing the game, man. You just do what you can do, and do what you're supposed to do, and learn from it. And be the voice of reason with your children, and tell them, hey, this is not a game you want to play because it's not fair."**

*(Father Focus Group - Non-custodial)*

These fathers may not understand that they can reschedule these dates or may not know the right steps for doing so. Although courts provide this information in writing, there may need to be further consideration for helping fathers interpret this information. Some barriers may include literacy, an overabundance of information that overwhelms fathers, and the lack of legal aid or resources that help fathers understand what steps to take and how to present the best case.



“... I brought my receipts to court...And I came in late. And by that time, the decision was made, I was already on child support. And then when I tried to go back to fight it, it was already carved in stone.” (Father Focus Group - Non-custodial)

### ● INCARCERATION AND FEELINGS OF HOPELESSNESS

Incarcerated fathers can face significant hurdles, which may lead to feelings of hopelessness. Challenges with the system disenfranchise fathers and make them feel like they do not have options. For example, fathers discussed feeling like it is highly likely they will return to jail for violating terms of probation.

For some fathers, incarceration itself is the barrier that gets in the way of parenting. It is difficult for fathers to be engaged parents or to participate in parenting while incarcerated. Major consequences of incarceration are not only a loss of the parent-child relationship and a continuation of the fractured attachment and bonding, but also the potential for the child's displacement from the family home.

“I've been incarcerated most of my son's life. So I'm still trying to figure out what it means to be a father. I never really handled my son so, still trying to figure it out slowly but surely. I know I love him more than I've loved anything in my life, though. My son was 20 months old when I came home from prison. She was two months pregnant when I went to jail. And now here I am, he's two and a half. He's been out of the home since March.” [focus group was conducted in August] (Father Focus Group - Legal System)

### ● SUPPORT FOR FATHERS' REENTRY AFTER INCARCERATION

Fathers who were incarcerated (or previously incarcerated) acknowledged that once released, they face significant challenges (e.g., addiction, recidivism) and reported feeling driven, out of a desire to show up for their children, to make better choices. Fathers themselves know that the struggle lies in having access to the right resources and support when they transition out; their anxiety around this is saturated in their choice of words and in the tone of their voices.

**FACILITATOR:** “What is standing in the way, if anything, of being the kind of parent you want to be?”

**FATHER:** “Jail is mainly in the way and alcohol used to be in the way. Now it almost seems like it's going to be so hard to get the kids back. And it is going to be hard. And that's going to be in the way, definitely, whatever social services wants me to do to be able to get them back.” (Father Focus Group - Legal System)

Fathers themselves know that the struggle lies in having access to the right resources and support when they transition out; their anxiety around this is saturated in their choice of words and in the tone of their voices.

Fathers described the challenges they face in accessing their children when coming out of incarceration, including extended or ongoing legal issues with their co-parent that affect the relationship with their children. Fathers are aware of the need to reduce their chances of reoffending, in order to show up for their children and to build stability and trust in those relationships. Fathers do not want their ongoing or repeated presence in jail to be a constant part of their children's lives.

**"My biggest need is to stop going back into jail... One of my biggest needs is regaining the trust of my kids because they keep yelling at me and say, 'oh, he's in jail again. Here we go again.' It's part of their life now, dad's always locked up."**

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

Similarly, community partners discussed how the involvement of the legal system regarding placement and custody, history and threat of incarceration, as well as probation and reintegration interferes with fathers' involvement with their children.

**"I remember having dads who were involved, but then because of custody issues, they kind of pull away. A lot of the dads, I think, that I had worked with - they'd be on probation, and they'd have these custody issues where the other parent, the mom, would kind of manipulate. Then there's a lot at stake I think for dads too if they're caught up in other systems like probation or CPS. I've seen some back away and say, you know what, this is too much. I'm just going to let mom raise the kids because it's too difficult, and I end up getting thrown in jail."**

*(Community Partner - Health & Human Services)*

Fathers discussed wanting support systems that see them as parents and facilitate their father-child relationships, as well as support systems that help them with addiction and life choices. Fathers highlighted that as they transition out of incarceration and back into the community, they need systems of

Helping fathers get established and connected within their communities to meet basic daily needs provides the stability necessary for them to show up and be the parents they want to be for their children.



support that help them strengthen their parenting skills and continue building on the skills they may have learned while incarcerated.

**"...Like I said, I got 27 more months of this shit [referring to Probation Services]. And I got to deal with it. And I heard a lot. I know that this is about fathers, fatherhood, and I want to better myself. I want to hear what other fathers do and stuff like that. And I want to better myself and all. And that's all I can do is better myself, right?"**

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

However, fathers need more than just parenting support. Helping fathers get established and connected within their communities to meet basic daily needs provides the stability necessary for them to show up and be the parents they want to be for their children.

**"I want something to help me find a job, something that can- as far as being a parent, something to help me pick up the kids and go do an event type deal and create a memory type deal. And maybe something to do with the library."**

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

Losing access to public service supports is often a major consequence post-incarceration. For example, some fathers talked about how they can no longer live in the same family home with their children if the mother and child are receiving certain public services.

**"I can't get housing. I can't even live at my ex's house because she lives in public housing. I can't even legally live there where my child is. I still did, but you know, I'm not allowed to do that. And that's- why is that? Why do I not get to get the same help that she gets?"**

*(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

**...I can tell you I've not been allowed into the correctional facilities yet, and I'm in my fourth year doing my job and asking to be able to connect with people. Two weeks before they get out, I would like to meet with them and provide them with resources...And find out what are the eight things or what are the two things or the five things your family is going to be facing, not just you.**



Fathers who have been incarcerated are often disconnected from their communities after they are released, and therefore rely on common knowledge or word of mouth to find resources. This can also mean community-based programming is not easily accessible or directed towards their needs. Often, there is a disconnect between inmate services and community services, such that incarcerated, work-released, probationary, and post-probationary fathers are left untethered to any supportive services to help them meet their own basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, shelter). The importance of connecting people to these critical services prior to and after release is not always well-understood or prioritized.

**"...I can tell you I've not been allowed into the correctional facilities yet, and I'm in my fourth year doing my job and asking to be able to connect with people. Two weeks before they get out, I would like to meet with them and provide them with resources...And find out what are the eight things or what are the two things or the five things your family is going to be facing, not just you. But if you're going to a home where the mom doesn't have her diploma, we can help. If there's a child that's about to get kicked out of school, here's who can help, so that we can learn what their barriers are and get them connected right away, so they're not walking into such a bad situation and being overloaded with all of the catastrophes that are in play."**  
*(Community Partner - Health & Human Services)*

In extreme circumstances, fathers may be released in severe conditions and without any support so that they are struggling immediately to secure basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter. This can set these fathers up for reoffending and becoming incarcerated again.

**"The county jail will only let people out after 2:30 in the morning. Such a bad policy. I got picked up in the summer, wearing this stuff, and I am put out in February in the clothes that I came to jail in, and it's 2:30 in the morning, and I'm hiding in a doorway. I've heard that the hospitality center opens its doors at 6:30 or 7:00, and I'm just shivering, and then along comes a couple after the bar closes about 2:30, they're stumbling back to their car, and boy, they've got coats and phones and wallets, and they are easy prey for me, and I'm desperate. And I reoffend, and if they had let me out when someone could have met me with a coat and shoes, that would have been so much better."**  
*(Community Partner - Health & Human Services)*



Huber centers, early release programs, and substance abuse courts are some examples of jails and prisons working together with community service providers to not only reduce recidivism, but increase social integration by helping inmates make the necessary connections prior to release and providing post incarceration follow up and support. This not only increases the likelihood of basic needs being met, but helps with long-term sustainability and helps fathers to make important social connections.

Although this is not the case in every community, or even in every circumstance, many incarcerated fathers cannot focus on their relationships with their children because the struggle to overcome homelessness, food security, and joblessness may be far too overwhelming. Conversely, one

interviewee who works at a jail reported no external factors interfering with their ability to successfully work with fathers, and attributed this to having support from the sheriff and the “jail captain” for programs.



### LET'S DISCUSS:

If legal systems continue to be punitive once an incarcerated father has served their sentence, then it is easy to see how recovery can feel impossible. Some fathers in these situations may remove themselves from their children's lives, despite the hurt of doing so, because we have created systems that do not allow an offender to reintegrate successfully and contribute meaningfully once restitution has been served. Ultimately, if we do not see incarcerated men as fathers, how can they?



In summary, there exists a deep and profound need for our society to review the systems in which parents interface and to find ways in which we can increase how fathers are included, valued, and deemed successful. This will not only benefit fathers, but also positively impact other family members (e.g., co-parents, mothers), and most importantly improve long-term outcomes for children.

## Additional Findings: Connections and Relationships Across Needs

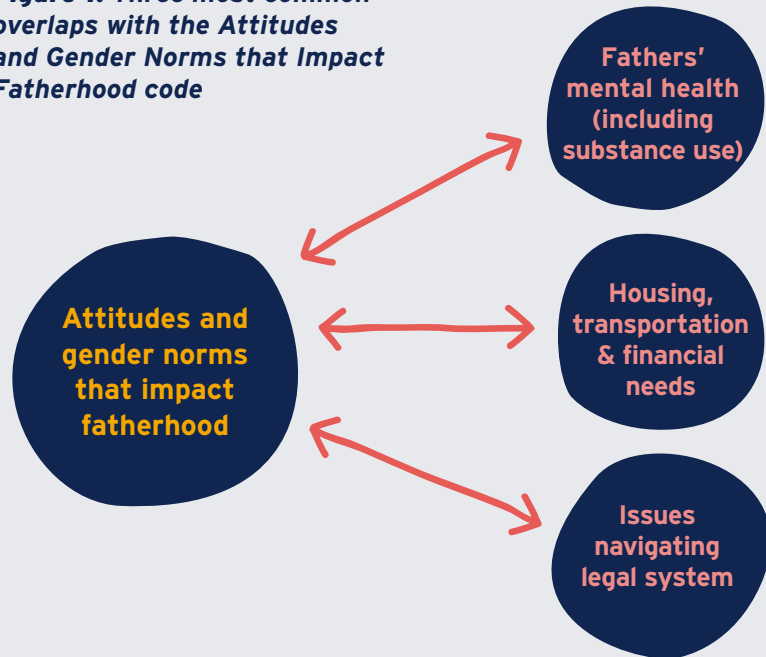
### I. Which needs occurred together?

**Multiple needs were often described within the same piece of text**

Throughout our data analysis, we noticed that some needs frequently occurred together in the same coded passages (e.g., same person). The three most common overlaps all included the “Attitudes and gender norms that impact fatherhood” code.

This overlap is not surprising given that **Attitudes and gender norms that impact fatherhood** was the most prevalent code in all of our data. We note, however, that these attitudes and norms often occurred in situations when fathers might feel marginalized, such as fathers who have been incarcerated, or fathers seeking therapy for mental health issues. While speculative, one possibility is that attitudes, stigmas, or gender norms limit fathers’ access to services that support these needs (e.g., mental health services, housing assistance, legal system support).

**Figure 1. Three most common overlaps with the Attitudes and Gender Norms that Impact Fatherhood code**



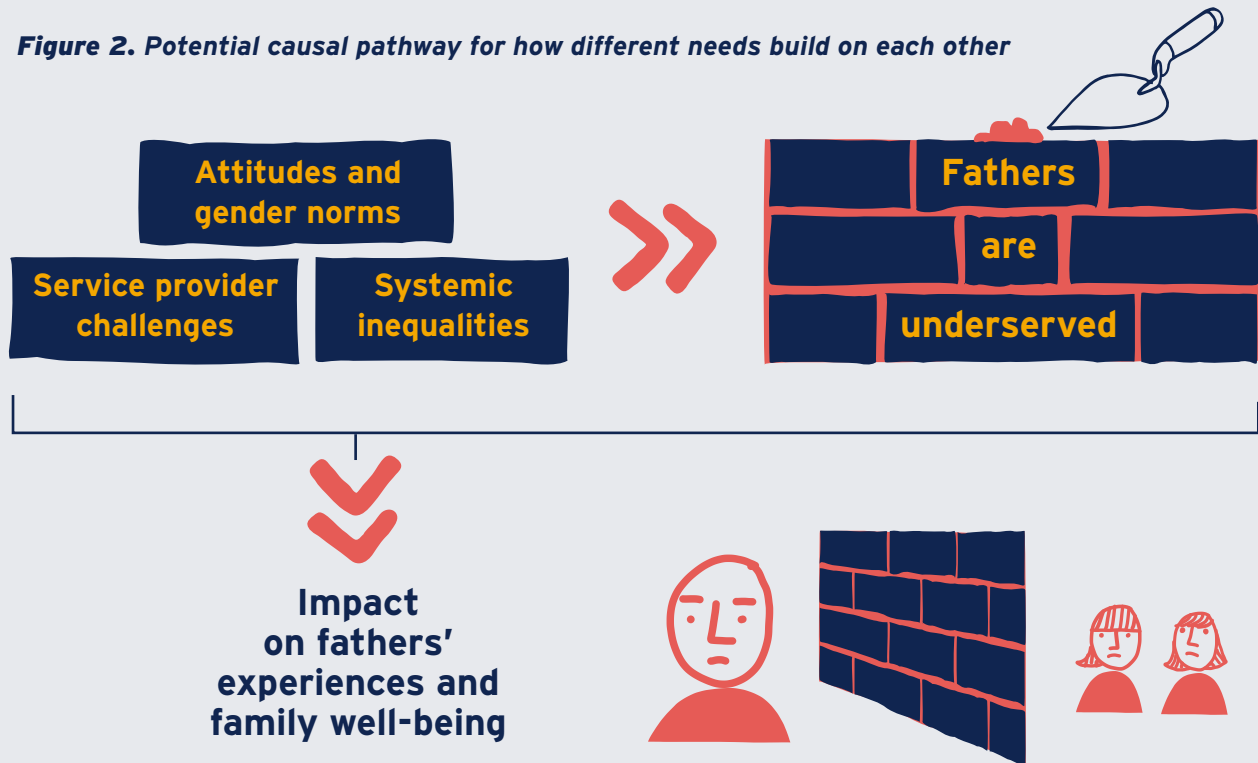
While speculative, one possibility is that attitudes, stigmas, or gender norms limit fathers’ access to services that support these needs (e.g., mental health services, housing assistance, and legal system support).



## II. Potential causal pathway for how different needs build on each other

While analyzing and interpreting the data from fathers and community partners, we realized that certain needs seem to build on and affect each other, particularly within **Theme 3: Systemic Barriers to Fatherhood**. The below figure showcases our hypothesis that a combination of service provider challenges, attitudes and gender norms, and systemic inequalities all contribute to fathers being underserved, which then negatively influences the whole family.

**Figure 2. Potential causal pathway for how different needs build on each other**





## BIG PICTURE QUESTION 3:

# What are possible solutions to address these needs?

After an exhaustive exploration of fathers' needs, we conclude our Results section with tangible ideas for programming and ways to address some of the needs. Overall, this section is brief in comparison to Big Picture Question 2 because a) there were significantly more needs identified than opportunities or solutions to solve them, and b) the main goal of this needs assessment was to identify fathers' needs and identifying appropriate solutions will be an ongoing, collaborative effort that extends well beyond the creation of this report.

**When analyzing data around program opportunities, we organized the ideas and emerging themes around either individual fathers or the systems they are a part of. We considered any themes that emerged around working directly with fathers to be at the individual level. On the other hand, systems-level refers to themes that emerged around working or partnering with agencies, but not working directly with fathers.**

Coded content for this section comes from both direct responses to questions around how to develop programming for fathers and what is needed, as well as ideas around programming that were generated in response to other questions during the interviews and focus groups.

## Individual Level

At the individual level, opportunities emerged in three main categories:

- 1) father-specific direct education and support**
- 2) father-based peer groups**
- 3) adjustments to current programming, outreach, and promotion**

## ● ● FATHER-SPECIFIC DIRECT EDUCATION

In the interviews with community partners, father-specific direct education mainly included ideas for helping men with parenting and providing appropriate supports to help them fill their fatherhood roles. Several community partners suggested that it would be helpful to have classes about parenting and child development that were specific to fathers, even potentially offered prenatally or advertised at the hospital following childbirth. Some specific ideas suggested were trauma-informed parenting, ideas for interacting with their children, and father's rights and responsibilities. In addition to parenting skills, there were suggestions for curricula for fathers around co-parenting and healthy relationships, and support for fathers in jail to stay connected with their children.

Similar ideas emerged from the focus groups with fathers. Several fathers indicated they would like support around general parenting skills, with many emphasizing that they would like to attend programs specific to fathers. Some specific examples included education around communicating and guiding adolescents, navigating bullying and depression, and dealing with sibling rivalry. Ideas around helping fathers prepare for fatherhood and navigate the role changes and responsibility shifts that come with fatherhood also emerged from the focus groups. Several fathers highlighted the importance of co-parenting classes, and specifically that they should be required, extend beyond a single course, and include support for children as well. In addition to co-parenting classes, some fathers indicated a need for support with the divorce process. Specifically, fathers talked about the utility of a peer group of other fathers going through this transition where they could offer tips and strategies to each other, as opposed to fee-based services through an attorney's office.

*More ideas of specific topics for parenting education can be found under **Theme 2: Parenting Support**.*

Importantly, fathers expressed how valuable parenting programs have been for them when they have participated. For example, one father shared, **"It was over two years ago that I did those programs. And I can still remember the names of them. And I felt proud for achieving those certificates."** (*Father Focus Group - Legal System*).

While findings from Big Picture Question 2 (What do Wisconsin fathers need support with most?) revealed that fathers had a substantial number of basic needs that were not being met, relatively few ideas of opportunities for programming emerged in this area. One community partner mentioned that it could be helpful to screen fathers for postpartum depression. Along these lines, when asked about the types of services they would like to see, fathers in the focus groups discussed the need for programming that met needs beyond parenting, or help getting connected to the right services that could meet those needs. Some examples of this that emerged from the data were therapy and mental health services, career development, financial education, housing resources, and programs for fathers after they are released from jail. Several fathers in one focus group identified the need for help with navigating college or post-secondary education for their children, especially when they did not attend college themselves. These fathers specifically discussed needing help navigating financial aid applications and help accessing grants or scholarships. Again, few ideas emerged around programming that would meet these needs, but they were highlighted as desired services or programs.

## ● ● PEER GROUPS

Ideas related to peer groups were the most commonly discussed option when community partners were asked "How would you go about developing community resources for fathers, and what would some of those resources be?". It also came up during other sections of the interviews, including the question that asked about gaps in programs or services, and was mentioned by over half of the community partners we interviewed. Peer groups would address many of the needs identified by both fathers and community partners, such as the need for social connections, mentors, or role models. Many community partners specified that peer groups with fathers should be informal groups that are father-led and father-driven. They recognized that being with other fathers may help fathers feel more





...And it would be really good to have support from people who are in similar circumstances because they would understand, whereas someone who is not in it wouldn't... you can identify more with other people if they're in the same kind of situation...

welcome, comfortable, and willing to open up. A variety of topics were suggested for these groups, some of which include fathers' rights, navigating systems, and parenting challenges.

One community partner described this well:

**"Even like the dad mentors. Like having someone, whether it be from the church or whatever, I just think that's huge for people, for dads to have another dad who can mentor, kind of like in AA when they have their sponsor, you know that kind of thing. But even support groups just so dads know that they're not the only ones going through whatever situation they're going through."**

*(Community Partner - Health & Human Services)*

Peer groups were also mentioned by fathers in all focus groups. Fathers specifically mentioned that having groups of fathers in similar situations would be helpful, such as those going through divorce, co-parenting, or not having primary custody of their children, in order to feel supported by others who have been through or are dealing with similar challenges. One father shared:

**"...And it would be really good to have support from people who are in similar circumstances because they would understand, whereas someone who is not in it wouldn't. I mean, you can be compassionate. But you can identify more with other people if they're in the same kind of situation..."**

*(Father Focus Group - Shared Custody)*

Other fathers liked the idea of sharing parenting ideas and resources, such as how to find quality child care or navigate child support systems. Interestingly, during focus groups the facilitators observed fathers engaging in this resource-sharing process, and many fathers shared that they enjoyed the focus groups and would like more opportunities to share space with other fathers. For example, one father in the legal system focus group said: **"These meetings would be very helpful. Because if you guys have any more meetings, I'm fully down. I'll go back. I'll come back to another meeting if you guys have another meeting about this or whatever."** In another instance, a father offered advice around navigating the legal system and child visitation that was received very positively by another father.

### Q3: POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Relatedly, some fathers mentioned valuing opportunities for unstructured social time with other fathers. When asking for more social connections, a father remarked: **“not necessarily for it to be we’re here and we’re going to accomplish this really specific task or goal, but just having something consistent that encourages fathers to come and connect with each other. That’s what I would find the most beneficial.”** (*Father Focus Group - Full Custody*)

Some fathers mentioned that these opportunities may include children:

**“I’ve never had that experience, but I just think it’d be a great idea for fathers who have co-parenting issues, to just all meet up once, and have a big barbecue, bring the kids to the table, and let them have fun. Set up some games. Let them play basketball, baseball, soccer, whatever they like and love. And let them know that we have a group that’s just for them, and we love them.”**

(*Father Focus Group - Non-custodial*)

Other fathers specifically mentioned the benefit of spaces without children:

**“At least for us, right, it’s like my husband will talk to people and I’m more navigating the children and, is that appropriate behavior, and all of that kind of stuff. So connection really doesn’t happen as much because I’m, again, navigating the children. So I think where those social interactions can happen, but where the kids-- whether it’s with or are kind of separated, right, can be kids and where the parents can be with other parents and just kind of talk and not have to worry about the kids-- I think it’s a really important piece.”**

(*Father Focus Group - Full Custody*)

Interestingly, during focus groups the facilitators observed fathers engaging in this resource-sharing process, and many fathers shared that they enjoyed the focus groups and would like more opportunities to share space with other fathers.



In summary, the idea of father-based peer groups or shared space for fathers was the most commonly mentioned opportunity for programming across both interviews and focus groups. Father-based peer groups have the potential to provide emotional connections, be a space to share information, and to offer concrete support for fathers across many communities and populations.


### ● ● ADJUSTMENTS TO EXISTING PROGRAMMING, OUTREACH, AND PROMOTION

In addition to creating new father-specific programming, several ideas emerged around adjusting current or new programming to be more inclusive of fathers. Several community partners mentioned the importance of being inclusive of all fathers, including but not limited to gay and transgender fathers, grandparents, fathers involved in the legal system, noncustodial, and single fathers.

The most commonly mentioned theme in this section was ideas around getting fathers to attend programming. Fathers noted the importance of promoting fatherhood programming and making sure fathers are aware of programs that are available. One method for increasing father attendance is through being intentional in the marketing and promotion of programming. During interviews, community partners identified new and creative ways to recruit fathers, such as reaching out and promoting programming through non-profit organizations that already serve fathers (e.g., churches, YMCA, Knights of Columbus), advertising programming at events that are focused on fathers (e.g., Daddy Daughter Dances), or pairing programming with court-ordered Human Service or criminal justice programs. Similarly, one interviewee suggested offering more activities for fathers and children to attend together and then build on that by offering or advertising parenting programs at the events. Fathers specifically recommended promoting the programs through schools and to fathers in jail or prison.

Another idea that emerged from the community partner interviews was to increase access for fathers by overcoming barriers that prevent them from attending. Examples included providing transportation or childcare, or offering programming online so more fathers could attend.

In focus groups, fathers also made a few suggestions for getting fathers to attend programming. One father mentioned engaging children, because fathers are likely to attend something their children are interested in.

 **"Like if my kid would have came home from school and said, here dad, look at this. And I look at this and be like, oh, yeah, you want to do it? And he's like. Well, let's do it. Well then I'd do it, you know?"**

**Yeah, I mean I'd definitely participate in anything that they want to do. I mean...I can't speak for these guys. But I'm saying this is what I would do. So like what [another father in the focus group] said, more promoting, or more hands on I guess. Get the kids involved. Get the kids to get at the dad's type deal, you know?"** *(Father Focus Group - Legal System)*

In addition to increasing attendance of fathers in programming, several ideas emerged around how to make programming more inclusive of fathers so they feel more comfortable attending or that the program is relevant to them. Multiple interviews mentioned the importance of having male presenters or leaders in father programming, as well as letting fathers pick topics or asking them what they need help or support with. Offering programming that is led or co-facilitated by fathers for fathers may increase program validity to those who could most benefit from programming. Another example was including photographs of fathers in program promotion so fathers feel





welcome and invited. Other suggestions included adapting programming that is traditionally focused on mothers to include fathers, such as including a father component of Women and Infant Children (WIC) programming, or engaging fathers in prenatal care and education.

This was echoed by fathers in the focus groups as well. One father mentioned that programming should always include both mothers and fathers and should not be separate, while others mentioned that they would like fathers to be invited to programming, even if it is targeted more toward mothers (e.g., breastfeeding).

**"I think that any topic in regards to children, we both should be involved... Could be that the mom is taking notes, might lose the idea or due to thinking about something else, X, Y, or Z could forget. Or not catch what the person giving the course was trying to give. So I feel that by complimenting the mother and the father, whatever topic it may be, it helps. Because that way if mom is not doing something right, or at least for breastfeeding, if they're not doing something correct... Maybe the father will be able to have the position to say, love, maybe you shouldn't be doing it like this. They taught us to do it this other way. Or like the doctor said, let's do it in this way. Or whether it's regarding bullying. If mom says, look maybe let's do it like this. And if the father could have the capacity to be able to say, love, no. Because the specialist said that we should do this other thing. So it's whatever it may be, I feel that the actual situation you need to involve both." (Father Focus Group - Latino Fathers)**

Interestingly, in this fathers' description of programming typically targeted for women, he also described topics like bullying and support for children with learning challenges, which speaks to how these general parenting and child-related programs are often directed toward or perceived as exclusive to mothers.

One father recommended taking a whole family approach in how programming is developed, titled and/or marketed, **"to help us, for example, to how to maintain a healthy home, without so many problems. To communicate amongst a couple how to resolve problems or obstacles that may arise, or continuously arise, or if a big obstacle occurs. I think that if there was some type of leader, family leadership program, it would help educate children, as well. How to call their attention, how to talk to them, how to express ourselves as parents with children. I feel that I would like that if you do something like that, I'd be very interested in some type of family leadership program."** (Father Focus Group - Latino Fathers)

In contrast, some fathers noted the importance of programming that was specific to fathers because they have felt excluded in programs that were targeted toward mothers. One father mentioned that what makes programs valuable for him is feeling supported and comfortable in the programs he attended (i.e., drug court), and like the people he interacts with are trying to help him and not “out to get him.”

In summary, consistent findings emerged throughout the interviews and focus groups that there is a desire for programming that is specific to fathers and their unique needs, and that fathers could benefit from spaces that include only fathers or are more inclusive of a father perspective. Existing programming does not always do this and that may affect whether fathers attend and how comfortable they feel when they do attend programs. Existing programming that serves parents and families would benefit from review and potential revision of its programmatic scope to ensure that it’s intentionally directed towards fathers as a specific audience with specific needs.

## Systems or Community Level

At the systems level, we identified two major categories where there is a potential to offer a response. First, there is a need for the community and existing systems to provide resources to fathers. Some examples of these resources include child care and transportation, employment support, and support navigating the legal system (e.g., child support, custody). Second, there is an opportunity to help organizations and systems understand the value of fathers and fatherhood, which also includes acknowledging or changing gender norms and stigmas that influence how fathers access programs and resources. Although many organizations recognize the need for these changes, they are not sure how to accomplish it.

## PROVIDING RESOURCES TO FATHERS

Across interviews and focus groups, opportunities emerged around providing resources that fathers needed or wanted to fulfill their fatherhood role. Many of these opportunities did not involve providing individual-level or direct support to fathers, but rather partnering with other agencies or systems to be sure that fathers could access these resources. The main resources that emerged from the data were child care and/or transportation, employment support, legal-system related support, and events or activities for fathers to attend with their children.

A specific example of concrete support highlighted in the interviews was to have child care available to allow fathers to attend parent teacher conferences. More broadly however, several interviews shed light on the lack of quality child care (child-care deserts) as being an issue for fathers and a potential opportunity for collaborative community-level systems work. An opportunity for businesses and employers to be part of the solution by providing onsite child care was one suggestion. Similarly, one father in a focus group suggested a rideshare program that would help transport kids from one place to another (e.g., from band or soccer practice and back) for parents who do not have their own transportation.

### Q3: POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Several suggestions emerged from community partner interviews around working with employers and helping fathers find employment or better employment/careers. For example, fathers may need more soft-skills training or help navigating job search or hiring systems. Similarly, interviewees suggested working with employers to help support fathers, which may include partnering with them to offer fatherhood support.

Partnership and support of the criminal justice system in meeting the needs of fathers is another area of opportunity. Currently many men seeking parenting education and or support are fathers who have encountered the legal system either through divorce, custodial issues, or because of criminality as a consequence of addiction issues. It may be valuable to examine partnerships with programs, such as Treatment Alternatives and Diversion (TAD) to provide resources or father-specific education to men in these situations. Challenges navigating the legal system can inhibit fathers' involvement with their children. For example, offering resources that assist fathers in understanding how to reschedule court dates is an opportunity. Relatedly, there may be an opportunity to help support fathers in staying involved with children even while facing custody, visitation, or co-parenting challenges. In situations like this, agencies could help support fathers by providing: 1) support for healthy co-parenting connections, or establishing safe routes for fathers to connect with their children when there are broken co-parenting connections; and 2) skill-building to help fathers stay involved with their children even when their external world is variable or unpredictable.

Similarly, fathers are looking for community-based programming that is inclusive and welcoming to fathers who have been involved in the legal system. In one focus group, a father mentioned that it would be beneficial to have a program that helps fathers in jail communicate with their children, something that Extension already offers through our Literacy Link programming. This suggests there may be value in

I would like more hands-on stuff with kids maybe. Like he said, put the tablets down, open the books up, go places, do stuff. More hands-on programs, I guess.






expanding some of our existing programming that serves fathers to more areas across the state, or alternatively, making sure fathers are aware of Extension programming that is already available to them. Along those lines, in some cases there are resources for fathers available, particularly upon being released from jail, but fathers are not informed of what those are or how to access them. There is an area of opportunity around jail staff and community partners working together to coordinate services for fathers upon being released from incarceration. Internally, there is an opportunity for our own interdisciplinary work, for example with Extension's Health & Well-Being Institute to address the lack of access to mental health services, addiction treatment, and even anger management services. Community partners also suggested that the Department of Corrections could be a place to disseminate information (e.g., transportation, housing, finances) in order to better support fathers involved in the legal system.

One opportunity that emerged from the focus groups with fathers, but not community partner interviews, was offering fathers an easier way to attend events or activities for fathers and their children. They indicated wanting more activities overall, but also the desire for increased access to these activities (e.g., museums, zoos) through free tickets or free admission days. One father shared, **"I would like more hands-on stuff with kids maybe. Like he said, put the tablets down, open the books up, go places, do stuff. More hands-on programs, I guess."** (*Fatherhood Focus Group - Legal System*). Although they mentioned a wide variety of activities, they specifically mentioned wanting **"places to take our children to gain knowledge."** In another focus group, a father suggested financial help for children's activities and programs because the cost of them can be prohibitive for many families.

Throughout the interviews with community partners, we discovered that there are opportunities and limitations with family-serving agencies to provide fatherhood resources. Capacity building for partner agencies is an opportunity, such as providing training in research and evidence-based curricula, providing professional development for early childcare educators, or offering workshops on best practices to engage fathers. One community partner mentioned seeking funding specifically dedicated to doing fatherhood-focused work.



**"Maybe there is some type of funder out there that wants to get started on this particular topic. And that would be the way you'd have to go about doing it, is to find someone that wants to work specifically with dads."**

Later in the same interview...

**"To be honest, I haven't given it [resources for fathers] a huge amount of thought, because I knew I didn't have any funding for it, because I have too many other-- there's just too many needs in our community, to be honest with you. There's just too much."**  
(*Community Partner - Family Resource Center*)

Further, there are many resources available for fathers but often there does not appear to be consistent or clear coordination and communication between agencies that provide different resources or services. The data suggests that even some family-serving agency employees and

directors need to be informed about father-specific issues. Perhaps this is an opportunity for our own interdisciplinary work with Community Development colleagues to help community partners with strategic planning in an effort to include fathers more intentionally in their agency's mission, priorities, and professional development plans.

## ● ● VALUING FATHERHOOD AND FATHERS


Effectively supporting fathers is more than just offering programs directed at fathers. It is also a wider systems issue of creating an environment where fathers are not only able to take advantage of such programming, but are supported or encouraged to do so and feel welcome in parenting spaces. One theme that emerged in this area is increasing the value that society, service providers, and other community partners place on fathers and fatherhood. Increasing the value that agencies and service providers place on fathers may help the community better meet fathers' needs. Many community partners directly acknowledged the need to recognize the roles of fathers and how stigma, stereotypes, and norms disadvantage them, while others seemed to buy into these cultural norms. For example, one community partner from a correctional facility suggested that **"I know there's a lot of things out there for fathers... It's up to them to take advantage of it. The services are there."** Often, community partners reported that their programs were open to fathers but they just did not attend or were not interested. Comments such as these from the community partners themselves draw attention to opportunities to educate our communities and improve the value societies and systems place on fathers, even among those who exist to support families. There is an opportunity to help agencies better engage fathers and to value their experience, unique contributions, and capacities as fathers.

In contrast, some community partners recognized that we need to value fathers more. One person emphasized the importance of speaking up when stereotypes about fathers are mentioned, such as that fathers "babysit" their children. Having more of these conversations will help to downplay and correct the stereotypes about fathers that minimize their roles. Similarly, one community partner highlighted the importance of promoting fathers' importance in children's development - **"marketing that dads are super, super important for kids"** (*Community Partner - Health & Human Services*).

One person emphasized the importance of speaking up when stereotypes about fathers are mentioned, such as that fathers "babysit" their children. Having more of these conversations will help to downplay and correct the stereotypes about fathers that minimize their roles.


Similarly, there was one idea around diverting funds from jails and putting it toward fostering good parenting norms in an effort to change the way that we, as a society, view and value parenthood and fatherhood. Several ideas emerged around bringing community partners together in order to better serve or market programming to fathers. This may include engaging community providers such as schools and clinics to help them be more inclusive of fathers.

Further, there is an opportunity to help judges and the legal system value the unique contribution of fathers as much as they value the contributions of mothers. In focus groups, fathers suggested finding ways to have healthier conversations during family court proceedings and approaching fathers as though they also have needs that need to be met so they do not have to work harder to be seen the same way as mothers, or to receive the same rights and support as mothers. As one father put it,



**"And then I can tell you, as a man, a lot of times the conversation that we hear in the family court process is that a lot of things are implied for women and that, for guys, we kind of have to do a little bit more to show some things in there. And so I think that, as we begin to really have these discussions and kind of deconstruct what that process really means because, traditionally, the wife gets the kids and then dad gets to go and continue to support the family like nothing changed. And that's just it. Everything just changed because we're no longer a unit combined." (Fatherhood Focus Group-Shared Custody)**

Employers could better understand the needs of fathers around child care and family responsibilities, particularly for single-parent fathers. One community partner described the need for employers to create environments where fathers do not fear losing their job due to parenting responsibilities:



**"So as we move into this generation of, you know, kids in single parent households, specifically with dads, I think supportive work environments that say, hey, there's some flexibility...you know, that eliminates that fear of losing your job when you have to leave work because your child has the flu, or they have to be picked up from childcare, or they have to be picked up from school, and understanding, you know, some of those relations in the work environment. You know, more education for work environments to be supportive of single family households." (Community Partner - Health & Human Services)**

The support fathers are looking for here may come from Extension or other community partners who can disseminate research and findings, such as those in this report, to help employers and family serving agencies better understand the perspective of fathers, as well as the importance of their involvement for children's well-being.

Importantly, while several needs emerged around changing societal and gender norms and stigmas that disadvantage fathers and their roles in children's lives, there were few, if any, ideas for how to change that. This may be an area of growth or opportunity for the Division of Extension and community partners.





**BACKGROUND + METHODS**



## Background

Despite recent advances in research on fathers' roles and unique contributions within families, fathers remain underserved in family-based programming, education, and resources (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). This is due to a number of barriers originating from community partners, cultural norms, legal structures, and fathers' abilities or desires to participate. Yet, fathers' contributions to child and family well-being are critical. Children with more engaged fathers exhibit higher academic achievement, better psychological outcomes, fewer challenging behaviors, and are less likely to be involved in drugs, violence, or delinquency (Allen and Lo, 2012; Barker et al., 2017; Kim and Hill, 2015; Lee and Schoppe-Sullivan, 2017). Fathers' engagement is particularly vital for vulnerable children, such as those from single-parent and low-income households (e.g., Choi and Pyun, 2014). Fathers' contributions extend beyond the child to include the entire family system. For instance, father support and involvement is associated with lower maternal stress (Harmon and Perry, 2011), and may buffer the effects of maternal depression on child outcomes and family cohesion (Mezulis et al., 2004; Vakrat et al., 2018). Thus, supporting father-child connections is crucial for child and family well-being.

Providing equitable access to fathers in family-based programming and resources requires a thorough understanding of the barriers that prevent father engagement. Studies over the past 20 years have revealed that regardless of race, age, or socioeconomic status, fathers have consistently acknowledged the impact of their involvement with their children and the barriers that may exist (e.g., Allport et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2011). One study showed that fathers' beliefs and feelings of efficacy reduced the influence of other barriers on father involvement (Freeman et al., 2008). Further, fathers who express a healthy relationship with the mother, are financially stable, and have an overall positive outlook about fatherhood and father involvement may experience more frequent contact and have an overall healthier relationship with their children (Child and Family Research Partnership, 2018). Together, these studies suggest that effectively supporting fathers and their well-being can have positive effects on family well-being.

Although research details the barriers that prevent fathers from engaging with their children and accessing services in general, little is known specifically about Wisconsin fathers and their needs.

These needs may differ from the fathers in other areas of the U.S. For example, 34% of Wisconsin families are headed by single parents, 10% of which are fathers (American Community Survey,

Although research details the barriers that prevent fathers from engaging with their children and accessing services in general, little is known specifically about Wisconsin fathers and their needs. These needs may differ from the fathers in other areas of the U.S.

2017), which is higher than the national average (27%; U.S. Census Bureau). UW-Madison Division of Extension's Human Development & Relationships Institute recognizes parents' importance for child and family well-being, and provides parenting programs to families across Wisconsin. Despite these efforts, Extension has few programs that are targeted specifically to fathers. Although fathers are welcome at most traditional parent education classes, few fathers attend Extension programming. According to Extension's internal reporting data, in 2021, males made up only 28% of our Family Engagement & Relationships Program's 6,491 contacts that provided demographic information, despite males making up 50% of the state population. Further, several county-based educators identified a lack of approaches and resources for supporting fathers in Wisconsin, often resulting in one-on-one case management with limited guidance. An internal assessment of our programming revealed that Wisconsin fathers' needs remained largely unknown, and no official report existed that assessed fathers' programming needs.

To address this gap, Extension conducted a statewide, multi-method needs assessment throughout 2020-2022 to identify the specific needs of Wisconsin fathers. This work also engaged Extension colleagues and father-serving organizations in programming, advocacy, and partnerships to improve outcomes for fathers and families. The multi-pronged needs assessment aimed to provide information about: 1) the specific needs of fathers across the state of Wisconsin; 2) perceptions of fatherhood and gaps in services from existing family-serving organizations; and 3) strategies to support fathers in their role as a unique contributor to children's development. This needs assessment will inform Extension's response to support fathers across the state of Wisconsin and describe needs and opportunities for other agencies to consider.

## IN THE RESEARCH...

Historically ignored in family research, we now understand that fathers parent differently than mothers and make unique contributions to their children's development (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2014; Palkovitz et al., 2014). When compared to mothers, fathers are more likely to engage in hands-on or "rough-and-tumble" play, encourage children's risk-taking, and support them in navigating novel or scary situations (Amodia-Bidakowska et al., 2020). Further, fathers' experiences of parenthood differ from that of mothers and socialized gender expectations place different, yet still constraining, pressures on fathers' well-being and family engagement (Palkovitz et al., 2014).

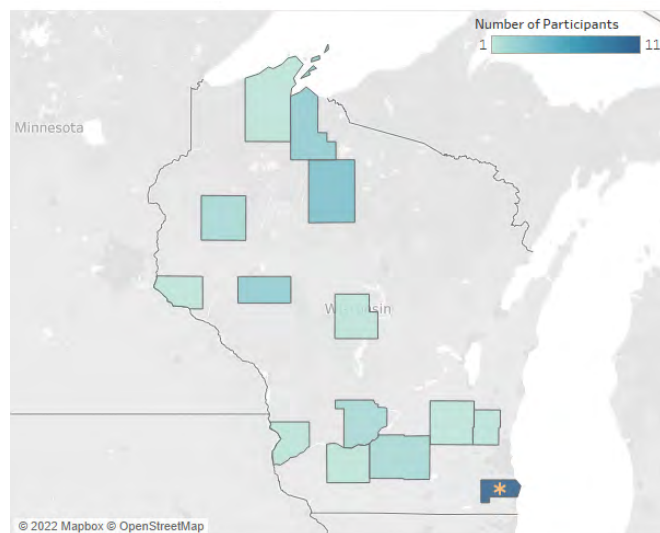
## Methods

Our approach to the needs assessment included two major phases that captured a wide variety of perspectives. In the first phase, we conducted 12 interviews and six surveys with 32 community partners from agencies and organizations working with children or families in Wisconsin. In the second phase, we held seven focus groups composed of 35 fathers residing in Wisconsin across a variety of family structures and circumstances.



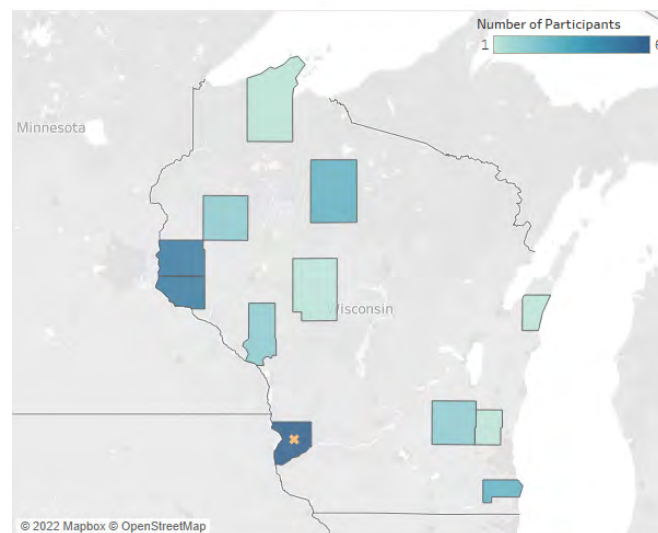
**Figure 1. Locations of participants in needs assessment**

### Fathers Who Participated



**NOTE:** Eight of these fathers gave input via a group discussion that wasn't transcribed (less robust data).

### Service Providers Who Participated



**NOTE:** These were done as surveys vs interviews (less robust data).

## ● ● COMMUNITY PARTNER INTERVIEWS

In fall 2019, county-based Extension educators involved in our fatherhood team brainstormed a list of 50 community partners across 15 counties that could provide valuable information about serving fathers in their communities. Potential interviewees were selected based on their scope of practice (e.g., supporting parents) and accessibility based on educators' networks. With this brainstormed list in mind, Extension educators around the state of Wisconsin conducted 12 interviews with local and regional community partners between December 2019 and March 2020. Five interviews were conducted as a group with more than one service provider, often from the same agency or organization. One group interview included an entire community coalition of 10 service providers from different organizations. In addition, one educator collected information using a survey format, which was completed by six community partners. In total, data was collected from 32 participants from 12 Wisconsin counties.

**Table 1. Interview methods and number of participants**

Method	Number of partners
One-on-one interviews	7
Group interviews	19
Interview questions sent as surveys	6
<b>Total partners who provided data</b>	<b>32</b>

The degree to which interviewees worked with fathers varied. In about half of the interviews, one or more participants mentioned no current programs in their organization specifically serving fathers, although they sometimes had a past program or were planning for a future father-specific program. In several cases, interviewees mentioned that they only serve fathers who are survivors of domestic abuse or assault. In the five interviews where the interviewees described their father-specific programming, the programs ranged from workforce development workshops focused on fathers, programs aimed at non-custodial parents (and were often fathers), religious programs in the jail that stressed fatherhood, home visits for fathers of 0-3 year-old children, supervised visits with fathers and their children, fun activities or community service work where the children spend the evening with their fathers (e.g., “Night Out With Dad”), workshops to help fathers and those who work with fathers understand how the child support and family court process works, and supportive court assistance for fathers with cases of child support default.

The interviews were designed to investigate community partners’ views on fathers’ needs, existing programs, and program gaps in Wisconsin. Interviews consisted of 11 questions, with the key topics being: 1) **“What are the major issues or concerns that you hear about from fathers in the community?”** 2) **“What are the biggest barriers that prevent fathers from being involved or engaged with their children?”** 3) **“What gaps in programs or services for fathers exist in the community?”** and 4) **Brainstorming around filling those gaps and addressing barriers.** Extension educators were asked to record the interviews or to take high-quality notes based on their preference and relationship with the community partner.

## ● ● **FOCUS GROUPS WITH FATHERS**

In phase two, focus groups were conducted with Wisconsin fathers between November 2019 - January 2021, with most of them occurring between June and August 2020. In order to support the best environment for group cohesion and active



The community partners were from a variety of agencies and community partners that included, but were not limited to: family resource and enrichment centers, community coalitions, health care professionals, domestic violence centers, human services, child support agencies, child protective services, and the legal and criminal legal systems.

### **Father-specific programming described by community partner interviewees:**

- workforce development workshops focused on fathers
- programs aimed at non-custodial parents
- religious programs in the jail that stressed fatherhood
- home visits for fathers of 0-3 year-old children
- supervised visits with fathers and their children
- fun activities or community service work where the children spend the evening with their fathers
- workshops to help fathers and those who work with fathers understand how the child support and family court process works
- supportive court assistance for fathers with cases of child support default

participation, each focus group consisted of fathers with shared experiences. Thus, focus groups consisted of the following categories:

- 1) Full custody:** Included fathers who were partnered and/or living with the other parent, or fathers who had sole custody
- 2) Shared custody:** Included fathers who were separated, divorced, or not living with their children's other parent but had some custody of their children
- 3) Non-custodial fathers:** Included fathers who did not regularly live with or have custody of their children
- 4) Fathers who were incarcerated or involved with the criminal legal system**
- 5) Spanish-speaking fathers:** Included fathers who spoke Spanish as their primary language. This focus group session was offered with Spanish-English interpretation.

**Recruitment.** A variety of recruitment methods were used by Extension educators. Most educators sent emails using their professional networks. They focused primarily on community partners that served fathers (e.g., Urban League, YMCA, Head Start, local jails). A few educators reached out to fathers from informal networks, or those that they knew either personally or professionally. To ensure our findings included diverse perspectives, recruitment materials were translated from English to both Spanish and Hmong, the second and third most commonly spoken languages in Wisconsin (after English). Educators also reached out specifically to organizations and partners that served Latino and Hmong families. We did not have success in recruiting fathers from Hmong-speaking families, which may be a result of cultural differences in caregiving roles and responsibilities or lack of trust from community members. One Extension educator was already working with fathers in an outreach program she facilitated, and recruited fathers from that program.

Of the fathers who expressed interest and were contacted for participation, between 33% and 83% attended per focus group. The lowest participation rate (33%) was in the focus group of fathers involved with the criminal legal system. Due to the low turnout, we conducted a second focus group for this population to ensure adequate representation from this group.

**Participants.** A total of 35 fathers participated across seven focus groups that each consisted of between two and eight fathers (see Table 2). Six of the seven focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and one focus group with eight fathers at a juvenile correctional facility was not recorded and transcribed but notes were taken.

Demographics were also requested at six of the seven focus groups. Two fathers had technical difficulties and could not fully participate, including completing the demographic information. Of the 25 participants for which demographics were collected, 73.1% identified as White, 11.5% as Black or African American, 7.7% as two or more races, and 3.8% preferred not to say. Five (23.1%) fathers identified as Hispanic or Latino. The participants in the focus group where demographics were not requested were fathers who also participated in an Extension program, where the demographics are



known to be primarily Black or African American and about one-third Hispanic or Latino. Of note, participation in one focus group included two mothers, one who attended with a partner and one who attended on her own. The mother who participated on her own did not actively contribute to the conversation, while the mother and father pair both participated.

**Table 2. Focus group categories and number of participants**

Focus Group Population	Number of fathers
Full custody	5
Shared custody	7
Non-custodial	2
Incarcerated or involved with criminal legal system (two separate focus groups to account for low attendance at first one)	8
Young fathers (under 25) incarcerated or involved with criminal legal system	8
Spanish-speaking	5
<b>Total father participants</b>	<b>35</b>

**Procedure.** All focus groups were conducted virtually via Zoom, lasting 90 minutes. Fathers were provided \$25 gift cards as a token of appreciation. For six of the seven focus groups, there was at least one state specialist and one county-based educator present to welcome fathers, describe the needs assessment, obtain their consent to record, facilitate, listen, ask follow-up questions, administer demographics poll questions, and coordinate gift card logistics. The focus group conducted in both Spanish and English was interpreted live by Extension’s Office of Access, Inclusion, and Compliance. Participants and facilitators of this focus group selected their preferred language at the beginning of the session.

The questions in the focus groups aimed at identifying fathers’ needs and challenges in fulfilling their parental roles, and uncovering specific strategies for attracting fathers to programs. Facilitators utilized 11 discussion prompts, including: 1) “What does being a father mean to you?;” 2) “What are some of the most challenging things about being a father?;” 3) “What services or organizations do you know about that could support you as a parent?;” 4) “What, if any, do you see as your biggest needs, as a father, for you today?;” and 5) “What kind of supports or services would you want to receive?”.

## ● ● DATA ANALYSIS

MAXQDA software was used to analyze all data. A data jam teamwork approach (Schmieder et al., 2018) was used, in which groups of three to five extension educators, program managers, and specialists analyzed data together during virtual meetings. In total, around 10 to 12 different faculty and staff provided their perspectives on interpreting the data including those who facilitated or participated in interviews or focus groups.

Employing thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2006), coders engaged in open coding and identification of emergent themes. At each data jam meeting, the coding group discussed and decided on relevant codes, commenting on connections to and differences across the interviews and focus groups, as well as lived experience, previous research, and theory. Initial codes were refined and organized, resulting in final codes reflecting salient and recurring themes. Following the recommendations of culturally responsive evaluation (Hood et al., 2015), we did not ignore outliers and included all findings. We first analyzed the interviews with community partners, creating an initial coding structure. We started with the same structure for the focus groups with fathers, adding on to it as new themes and findings emerged. Some of the interview and focus group questions differentiated between needs and barriers (to being the kind of parent they want to be, to accessing services/ supports, or to serving fathers as a community partner). Our initial coding scheme differentiated between the two until the team of analysts determined there was so much overlap between the terms that the term need encompasses barriers in this evaluation.

## ● ● POSITIONALITY

When analyzing qualitative data, it is important to acknowledge the influence of our own perspectives, views, and lived experiences. On one hand, we had a large team with a wide variety of perspectives and experiences with fathers who contributed to our findings. On the other hand, this is a report about fatherhood and our team only consisted of one father. All other team members identified as women, some of whom were also mothers and divorced or separated co-parents. Further, the majority of our team members have advanced degrees and identify as White. The team members included those who work directly with families and fathers, through avenues such as family programming and the legal system, those that do research on fathers and fatherhood, and those who do not interface with or study fathers directly. However, all members of this team were part of the Human Development & Relationships Institute in Extension, which values strong families and wants to support families and fathers in their health, well-being, and ability to support children.



DISCUSSION



## Fathers and Families: A Call to Action

This examination of fatherhood in Wisconsin has demonstrated the many challenges fathers face in being present for their children and highlighted the need to re-evaluate how we as a culture value fathers, fatherhood, and even parenting more broadly. This needs assessment has highlighted structural issues within American society that make parenting an uphill battle; however, parents who are marginalized by society, including fathers, must work even harder to be seen and valued as parents for their children.

The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* is part of the legally binding international instruments for the guarantee and protection of Human Rights. Adopted in 1989, this treaty contains the profound idea that children are not just objects that belong to their parents and for whom decisions are made, but rather, individuals with their own human rights. Included in those basic human rights are the right to health, education, **family life**, play and recreation. These rights also include, according to Article 7, **“as far as possible, the right to know and be cared for by his or her parents.”** The concept of “family life” is not a given for fathers, especially those who are consumed by work, those who do not have primary custody of their children, or those who are involved with the criminal legal system.

If we subscribe to this idea that family life is an inherent human right, and that all human beings are entitled to it, then we must examine how we are measuring up when it comes to all family members. How, as a country, are we setting ourselves up for success when it comes to ensuring that mothers, fathers and children are thriving in strong, healthy family systems? This fatherhood needs assessment would suggest that the United States, and particularly Wisconsin, is not doing particularly well on this score. For example, many fathers in this needs assessment discussed not being able to secure stable employment that provides the flexibility and finances necessary to support children’s care needs. Further, many fathers do not have enough access to community support services for basic needs such as housing, food and income support, or physical and mental health services.

Fathers in this needs assessment repeatedly expressed challenges to being included and welcomed across many parenting contexts, and are unable to overcome the expectation that their primary role in the family is to be a financial

We argue that no one in the family is served well by the challenges fathers face and how we as a society treat them. Meeting the needs of fathers, those discussed in this report and more broadly, is likely to result in downstream benefits for the whole family, and is of critical importance.


...maybe I'm here because somebody else has to hear my story, and understand the situation, and do better. Because there was no one there to help me, nobody to motivate me, nobody to coach me, nobody to direct me. So hopefully, one of the guys from the group will hear the footnotes of what's been said.

provider. Society gives fathers mixed signals about their roles from the beginning and then looks down on them repeatedly when they struggle to measure up. Even if we set our struggling fathers aside for a moment, we still have to ask, "how is it possibly serving mothers to put the burden on them to fill all these other roles?" Limiting fathers to financial providers and not seeing them as having an important role in caregiving inherently places a greater burden on mothers or other co-parents. We also have to consider children and question, "don't children deserve to be loved and cared for by all of their parent figures?" After all, it is part of their basic human rights.

We argue that no one in the family is served well by the challenges fathers face and how we as a society treat them. Meeting the needs of fathers, those discussed in this report and more broadly, is likely to result in downstream benefits for the whole family, and is of critical importance. Parenting is an enormous responsibility, which holds zero qualifications and yet can have significant positive and negative impacts on entire communities.

Our vision for fatherhood is expansive enough to hold space for community support, physical and mental health outreach, parenting education, and an understanding of the needs of fathers as parenting partners, not just meeting economic needs. **The current welfare of families stresses the urgency that action should be taken now. With national shortages in child care, ongoing concerns with sufficient housing and food security and ongoing waves of concern in both the physical and mental health sectors, shoring up the American family and helping fathers be present for their children has never been more important. Fathers participated in this study because they want change, and they want to be part of the solution. A father who second guessed participating in the focus group insisted on staying when he was reminded that participating is optional...**





**"...maybe I'm here because somebody else has to hear my story, and understand the situation, and do better. Because there was no one there to help me, nobody to motivate me, nobody to coach me, nobody to direct me. So hopefully, one of the guys from the group will hear the footnotes of what's been said."**

*(Father Focus Group - Non-Custodial)*

While this needs assessment has concluded, fathers' concerns, challenges, and needs remain. Many fathers are still committed, still showing up, and really want to be there for their children regardless of the fact that their presence, persistence, and commitment go relatively unacknowledged. For this reason, we hope that this work will continue to inspire positive change in the communities it influences and that more fathers will come forward to share their stories, and to add them to what has been learned and what will continue to be learned here.

## Implications for Research and Practice

The needs assessment informs Extension's response to support fathers across the state of Wisconsin and describes programming opportunities for Extension and other agencies to consider. The data are categorized on an individual and systems/community level. On the individual level, father-specific direct education is an important component. It includes aspects of helping fathers with basic parenting, life, and social and emotional skills using several delivery methods. On the systems level, there is an opportunity to help communities and existing systems provide resources for fathers and there is an opportunity to help organizations and existing systems understand the value of fathers and fatherhood which includes acknowledging and changing gender norms and stigmas that influence fathers' access to programs and resources.

Evidence-based parenting interventions and programs have consistently demonstrated short- and long-term positive effects on child well-being (Nores and Barnett, 2010), with the caveat that active parental involvement is the key to the success of these programs (Lundahl et al., 2008). Studies show that a father's presence is important for a child's overall development and many researchers have shared that the modern father wants to be more actively and physically involved in the day-to-day experiences of their children. Fathers are cited as being much more involved in play activities with their children that involve more physically challenging activities than mothers. These types of activities teach children the power of independence and being risk-takers and promote emotional connections (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2020).

Research consistently shows that engaging fathers as part of the parenting team has positive child and parent outcomes (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2018). Yet, our findings indicate that Wisconsin fathers either do not know about parenting programs or feel excluded. In fact this confirms other research that has consistently found that fathers have low levels of awareness about parenting interventions (e.g., Sicouri et al., 2018). One opportunity that can be accomplished with relative ease, is the adjustment of existing programming outreach and promotion. Extension can be intentional about using gender neutral terms, using images of fathers on promotional materials, and explicitly reaching out to fathers for inclusion in existing parenting programs. In addition, on a systems level,



Extension can provide leadership to other organizations on how to be more intentional about including fathers in existing parenting programs.

Even within this needs assessment report, we observed community partners having their own realizations during interviews and discussions about fatherhood. As described in the **Fathers are underserved** section, a partner from a family resource center shared their evolving thoughts and ideas during the interview:

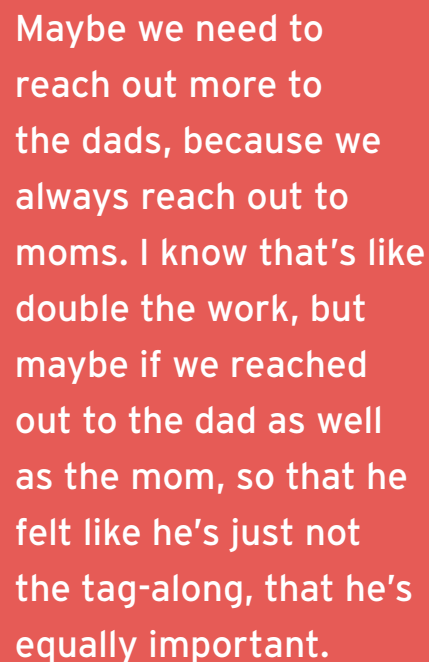
**“Maybe we need to reach out more to the dads, because we always reach out to moms. I know that’s like double the work, but maybe if we reached out to the dad as well as the mom, so that he felt like he’s just not the tag-along, that he’s equally important.”** This suggests that it may not be that hard to move the needle on helping community partners and agencies be more inclusive of fathers in their programming and outreach efforts.

Fathers, especially those who are poor and from marginalized communities, believe that their presence and engagement in the lives of their children is essential and has a unique contribution to the development of their child.

In a study that analyzed the impact of a federally funded parenting program, fathers shared how male role modeling resonated for them because it reinforced how personal finances or their ability (or lack thereof) to be financial providers were less important than their presence and capacity to be a strong role model (Randles, 2020). In fact, more than doctors, clergy, or other professionals, participants of a similar study mentioned other men and fathers in the community as primary sources of parenting information (Lee et al., 2011). Our needs assessment confirms this finding by showing that fathers want to learn from other fathers. In addition to the adjustment of existing programming, opportunities for direct father education could include father-led groups, father-led advisory boards, and peer-to-peer mentoring programs.

Our findings are consistent with qualitative research on fathers’ experiences which demonstrated that fathers engaging with the child welfare system desired respect, trust, to be heard, and not judged (Campbell et al., 2015). We also discovered that fathers want to feel empowered and want to build on their fathering strengths. We agree that a strengths-based programmatic approach that focuses on fathers capabilities, rather than a deficit model of fathering, is likely to be important for father-inclusive practices (Grief et al., 2007).

In summary, the findings of this needs assessment are in line with existing research on fatherhood and fathers’ experiences. The needs of Wisconsin fathers are no different than what has been consistently reported by fathers across the United States for decades: Fathers want to be involved in their children’s lives, want to have access to support they need, and want to be valued and respected as caregivers.



Maybe we need to reach out more to the dads, because we always reach out to moms. I know that’s like double the work, but maybe if we reached out to the dad as well as the mom, so that he felt like he’s just not the tag-along, that he’s equally important.

## Limitations

While this needs assessment was an in-depth and multi-perspective account of Wisconsin's fathers' needs, it also had its limitations. Two of the main limitations are described below.

### COMMUNITY PARTNER PERSPECTIVES

Perspectives of community partners may not have always accurately reflected fathers' experiences or perspectives or did not always consider larger systemic issues, such as access to services. Community partners often answered questions with a lens of seeing fathers as having deficits or needing to make up for societal shortcomings (e.g. **"dads don't want to/are afraid of/lack skills in..."**) as opposed to using language describing needs and barriers. For example, some community partners blamed fathers for their lack of involvement with children or blamed fathers for underutilization of services. For example, when asked about gaps in services for fathers in the community, one partner from a correctional facility described,

**"You know from what I see here in the jail, I don't believe there's any gaps because where we offer some many, many programs. And like with your relationship parenting class, the ones that want to take it will benefit from it. And, again, my community, I think there is a lot of things-- I know there's a lot of things out there for fathers. I can't think of a gap. It's up to them to take advantage of it. The services are there."**

In other cases, community partners seemed to have biases about fathers' parenting skills or may have generalized their experience with some fathers to all fathers: **"And it seems like fathers have the hardest time with structure in a home, routine in a home, a bedtime routine, that kids brush their teeth. Those are things that mamas think of, that daddies don't."** (*Community Partner - Family Resource Center*)

Community partners' beliefs and perspectives are likely shaped by their own lived experiences, their experience working with families, and larger societal attitudes. Only about half of the community partners we interviewed were currently serving fathers. It is also possible that some community partners are not comfortable examining their own or organizational practices especially if they are under stressful circumstances. *For more discussion of this issue, see [Service provider or program challenges](#) under [Theme 3: Systemic Barriers to Fatherhood](#).*

### DEMOGRAPHIC LIMITATIONS

Although we were intentional about sampling across five different groups of fathers, there are some perspectives that are underrepresented in this report. For example, we did not have representation from some significant populations in Wisconsin, specifically indigenous and HMoob communities. Our geographic representation was influenced by where Extension already had staff and strong relationships in the family service realm, and we had fathers and community partners from many but not all geographic areas in the state. For example, in regards to urban counties, there was representation from Madison, Racine, and Eau Claire, but not Milwaukee. Finally, we had

limited perspectives from LGBTQIA+ fathers. To our knowledge, only one father from our focus groups was parenting with another father. As such, the majority of views in this report reflect a heteronormative perspective and often reference father-mother relationships. It is important to consider that there may be some major needs or concerns of Wisconsin fathers missing from this report due to not having representation from these communities and populations.

## Strengths

The comprehensive nature of this report reflects our intention to be thoughtful, intentional and “in it for the long run” when it comes to working with fathers and responding to fatherhood needs. Our report is unique in its design of engaging fathers with different levels of child custody, fathers involved with the legal system, Spanish-speaking fathers, fathers spanning multiple geographies, and community partners spanning diverse organization types. Doing a multi-phase assessment where we started with community partners and built on that coding framework with in-depth data from fathers, as well as analyzing the data in data jam format where analysts with diverse perspectives weighed in on the meaning of the data, all increased the rigor of this assessment. The action-oriented purpose behind the assessment (i.e., the desire to create a programming response to the needs) and the compelling nature of the data motivated and empowered us to a) move forward in developing preliminary response strategies, and b) prioritize dissemination of these findings to multiple key audiences. We believe that every step towards child well-being is worthwhile, and collecting, discussing, documenting, and sharing information about fatherhood is a step in that direction.

































# APPENDICES



# CODE TREE: BIG PICTURE QUESTION 1

## How do fathers define successful fatherhood?

 Code trees depict the main categories that emerged from qualitative data analysis.

- ✓  Vision for fatherhood/ what does being a father mean to you?
  -  Big Responsibility
- ✓  Father attribute or strengths or values
  -  Dad social emotional skills
  -  Leadership
  -  Breaking the norm/ Be Yourself
  -  Cherishing and enjoying relationship
  -  Instilling work ethic
  -  Continual learning and adapting
  -  Child to develop and practice life skills
- ✓  Family wellbeing
  -  Strong parent relationships for kids/home
  -  Willing to sacrifice
  -  Persistence/Perserverance
  - >  Promoting positive fam. interactions
  -  Financial support
  - >  Fathers' wellbeing
- ✓  Child wellbeing
  -  Wanting better for kids
  -  Protecting kids
  -  Decision making
  -  Unique Contributions
  -  Socialemotional skills
  - >  Positive child development
  - >  Nurturing relationship
  - >  Active involvement
  -  Role modeling
  -  Positive effect on community/society

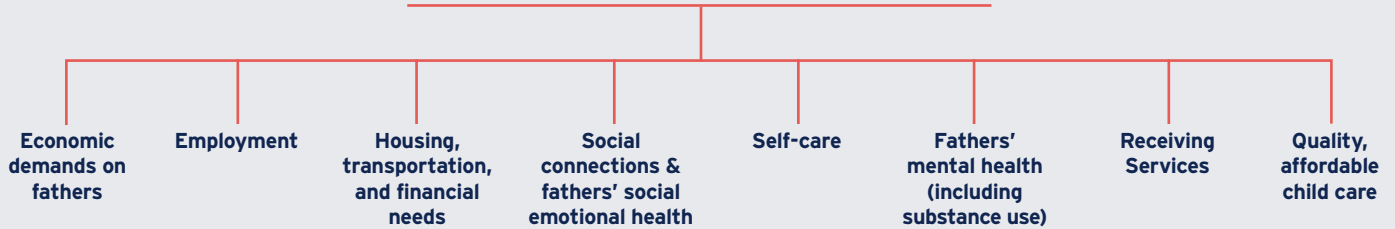




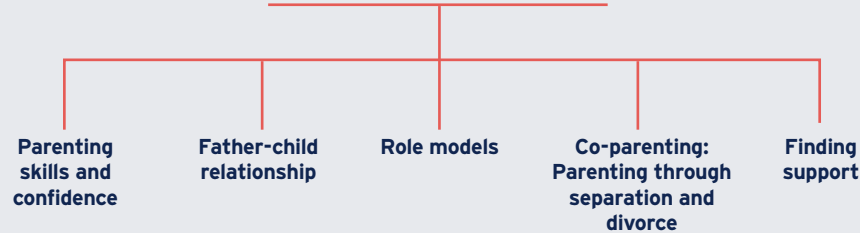
## CODE TREE: BIG PICTURE QUESTION 2

### What do Wisconsin fathers need support with most?

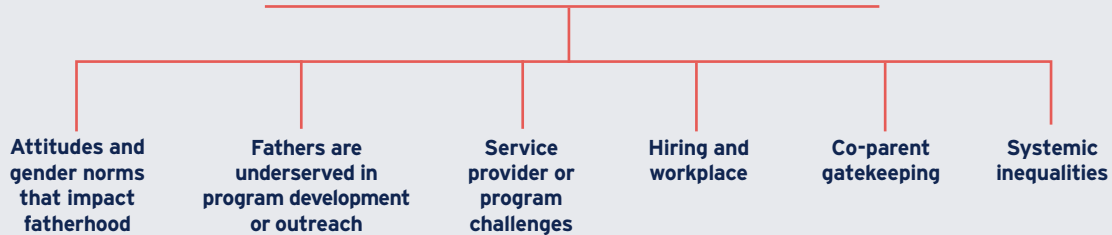
#### Basic Life Needs and Resources



#### Parenting Support



#### Systemic Barriers to Fatherhood



#### Challenges & Consequences Related to the Legal System





**Table 1. Who Reported Different Needs?**

Code Name	Fathers	Community Partners
<b>THEME 1: BASIC LIFE NEEDS AND RESOURCES</b>	●	●
Economic demands on fathers	●	●
Employment		
Housing, transportation, and financial needs		
Fathers' mental health (includes substance use)		
Quality, affordable child care		
Social connections & fathers' social emotional health	●	
Self-care		
Receiving services		
<b>THEME 2: PARENTING SUPPORT</b>	●	●
Parenting skills and confidence	●	●
Father-child relationship		
Role models		
Co-parenting: Parenting through separation and divorce		
Finding Support	●	
<b>THEME 3: SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO FATHERHOOD</b>	●	●
Attitudes and gender norms that impact fatherhood	●	●
Fathers are underserved in program development or outreach		
Service provider or program challenges		
Hiring and workplace		
Co-parent gatekeeping		
Systemic inequalities	●	

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**THEME 4: CHALLENGES AND CONSEQUENCES  
RELATED TO THE LEGAL SYSTEM**

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Issues navigating the legal system  
 Incarceration and feelings of hopelessness  
 Support for fathers' reentry after incarceration



**Table 2. Theme 1: Basic Life Needs and Resources Codes**

Code	Definition
<b>Economic demands on fathers</b>	Many fathers work long hours, physically demanding jobs, shift work, or multiple jobs. It can be extremely difficult to balance work, parenting, self-care and relationships, especially when working takes up a large proportion of time. Further, this prevents fathers from accessing parenting education and support, which is often only available during typical business hours. Fathers expressed a desire for more quantity of time with their children and for them this is essential to being able to be an influential part of their growth and development. Meeting basic needs and providing for children combined with American culture of “having more” interferes with this desire.
<b>Employment</b>	Fathers struggle to find stable employment, better paying employment, or less physically demanding employment, in some cases despite having completed higher education. Fathers (who can work long hours and strenuous jobs) want to better their situation in order to not work so many extra hours or such low paying jobs.
<b>Housing, transportation, and financial needs</b>	<p>Some fathers need help with housing, transportation, and experience general cost of living and financial issues. Lack of affordable housing, significant income going towards other commitments, and lack of access to housing assistance can further distance fathers from being able to provide for themselves or their families. Some fathers described needing to choose between having either housing or transportation. Finding housing can be overwhelming and difficult, especially during divorce or other major life changes.</p> <p>Community partners noted that these barriers affect fathers' time with children and ability to utilize services.</p>

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Code	Definition
<b>Social connections and fathers' social emotional health</b>	Fathers described various aspects of social and emotional health. For instance, it can be challenging to find social connections and support within their communities that they value and rely on in their fathering. In their wish to be the best role models they can be, fathers want to address their own social emotional needs better (e.g., managing strong feelings). Fathers aim to be the best version of themselves because of their children and in some cases expressed that this involves changing their thinking and behavior.
<b>Self-care</b>	Some fathers expressed the importance of taking care of themselves and that this is critical in their ability to take care of others. Fathers also understand that nurturing their relationship with their partners is important but this can conflict with desire to spend quality time with children. Limited available time due to working can affect fathers' ability to pursue independent hobbies and interests.
<b>Fathers' mental health (including substance use)</b>	<p>Community partners noted that fathers need support with mental health and addiction or drug use (e.g., meth, alcohol) and that there are gaps in mental health services, which interferes with fathers caring for their families.</p> <p>Fathers acknowledged the need or desire for counseling or mental health support. Some fathers feel as though they have to build a strong exterior and express sadness, pain and mental illness in isolation. Separation, divorce, and incarceration are experiences where fathers feel anxiety, shame and frustration. Some fathers recognized that they need to face some of their own previous trauma. Personal resistance or a lack of readiness for these services can be barriers to accepting these mental health and AODA services.</p>
<b>Receiving services</b>	Fathers that have had access to community resources such as self-development classes and public libraries can see the value and seek them out. Challenges such as distance to services or documentation and requirements (e.g., driver's licenses) present challenges to father's accessing human service programs. Some services, such as food or healthcare services, may not exist in some communities.
<b>Quality, affordable child care</b>	Fathers that have had access to community resources such as self-development classes and public libraries can see the value and seek them out. Challenges such as distance to services or documentation and requirements (e.g., driver's licenses) present challenges to father's accessing human service programs. Some services, such as food or healthcare services, may not exist in some communities.



**Table 3. Theme 2: Parenting Support Codes**

Code	Definition
<b>Parenting skills and confidence</b>	Some fathers described challenges around not having the right skills to feel confident in their parenting. They identified that having father-directed education around parenting skills would be beneficial. Community partners also identified areas where fathers might benefit from skill-building and reported that fathers express a desire for support and education.
<b>Father-child relationship</b>	Fathers described their desire to spend quality time and build connections with their children. When work obligations make fathers less physically present, fathers reported feeling concerned that their children do not seek them out and wanting to find ways to encourage this. Fathers also discussed feeling like children have a preference for their other parent over them. Fathers want their children to look to them for their needs and want to be perceived respectfully by their children.
<b>Role models</b>	Specifically, community partners reported that unresolved issues of paternity, custody, and visitation create barriers to fathers being physically and psychologically present. Blame toward the father regarding separation can be hard for fathers and children to overcome in their relationships.
<b>Co-parenting: Parenting through separation and divorce</b>	Fathers who are not raising children in the same household as the children's other parent reported challenges related to time with children, having enough resources, feelings of shame, instilling values in children, child support, contentious situations with the co-parent, how to co-parent during power struggles, feelings of lack of control, fears of how their children will perceive difficult situations, consistency for children, decision making, and sustained education and support.
<b>Finding support</b>	Fathers struggle to find resources for kids' mental health, going through a divorce, customized parenting support, or resources for how to navigate their ex-spouse's mental health challenges. In some cases fathers express wanting one-on-one contact with professionals.

**Table 4. Theme 3: Systemic Barriers to Fatherhood Codes**

Code	Definition
<b>Attitudes and gender norms that impact fatherhood</b>	<p>Gender norms in our society, and related stigmas, influence attitudes and behaviors towards fathers, and affect fathers' abilities to access needed programs and services. Some community partners explicitly named negative attitudes or beliefs about fathers and their reasons for not accessing services (e.g., "emotionally unskilled", "alcoholics"). Topics within this code include: fathers perceived as less important than other caregivers (e.g., mothers); fathers as financial providers; gender norms, vulnerability, and help-seeking; stereotypes about fathers; and judging fathers who have served their time.</p>
<b>Fathers are underserved in program development or outreach</b>	<p>Fathers' needs are not always considered when programs are created, marketed, or delivered. Community partners realize that their service approach treats fathers as an afterthought or add on. Existing programs are not designed for or intentionally marketed to fathers, and some programs, such as housing, are disproportionately inaccessible to fathers.</p> <p>Fathers know that support exists, but understanding how to access information around services, programs and resources is not straightforward or easy. In some cases, services are there but are not responsive or timely. Significant barriers exist for fathers accessing services and programs, such as limited hours and language.</p>
<b>Service provider or program challenges</b>	<p>Among community partners, there is confusion around who is offering services, including both mandatory and non-mandatory programs, and confusion about what happens when needed services end. There is also a lack of clarity about who provides speciality services. Organizations struggle with having sufficient resources to provide father-based programming. Community partners and organizations also struggle to engage fathers and overcome community views of their services (e.g., only for women), while recognizing that increasing the number of male service providers would help.</p> <p>Fathers recognized that it would be beneficial if some systems had more resource investment, and that this might help increase the capacity of the supportive services they provide.</p>
<b>Hiring &amp; workplace</b>	<p>Employers' recognition of paternal involvement in caring for children is not reflected in workplace policies or flexibility. Fathers reported being required to work excessive hours and continually explaining to employers that they need to be with their children. This creates barriers for fathers in scheduling time for children and family, being able to pick up children from childcare or school activities, or respond to child illness. Also includes discriminatory hiring practices against fathers who have been involved in legal system.</p>

Code	Definition
<b>Co-parent gatekeeping</b>	Both community partners and fathers highlighted common experiences of mothers withholding children from contact with fathers due to a variety of circumstances (e.g., disagreements over child support or visitation arrangements). These issues can negatively impact the well-being of both the father and the children due to either inconsistent or no connection to each other. Fathers reported that mothers do not always respect or value their relationships with their children, and may even view children's time with their fathers as less important than a child's responsibilities at the mother's home or priorities/consequences that the mother has for the child.
<b>Systemic inequalities</b>	Fathers described a variety of systemic inequalities that serve as barriers to them filling their fatherhood role, including but not limited to racism, mass incarceration, and intergenerational inequality.

**Table 5. Theme 4: Challenges & Consequences Related to the Legal System Codes**

Code	Definition
<b>Issues navigating the legal system</b>	Education and advocacy for fathers who are going through the court system is needed regarding fathers' rights, how to work with the legal system (including revising legal agreements), and where to go for legal advice. They often do not feel heard or valued during divorce, custody/ placement or child support cases, and experience problems with visitation orders being enforced and with paternity being established. Fathers feel they have an unfair disadvantage when it comes to trying to prove themselves as "good enough" for spending time with their children. There are ramifications of not paying child support, and the broader context is that many fathers do not understand child support or are not able to pay it.
<b>Incarceration and feelings of hopelessness</b>	Hopelessness and/or incarceration are major ways that fathers can be impacted by the legal system. Incarceration negatively affects access to children and the parent-child relationship (e.g., attachment and bonding), potential for displacement from the family home for the child, or placement in alternative care) as well as loss of access to public service supports (e.g., the father no longer being able to live in the same family home with their children if the mother and child are receiving public services that are prohibitive).



Code	Definition
<b>Support for fathers' reentry after incarceration</b>	<p>Some fathers coming out of incarceration face challenges in accessing their children, accessing resources/programs, living with unresolved health and addiction patterns, and recidivism. Fathers want to show up for their children and build stability and trust in those relationships. They do not want their ongoing or repeated presence in jail to be a constant part of their child's growing up.</p> <p>There is often a disconnect between inmate and community services, coupled with the lack of understanding of the importance of connecting the services of all providers before and after an inmate's release. There are cases where there is no support for fathers upon release so that they are struggling immediately to secure basic needs like food, clothing, shelter. This can set these fathers up for recidivism and can also negatively affect fathers' engagement with children.</p>

**Table 6. Opportunities for Programming**

Code	Definition
<b>INDIVIDUAL LEVEL</b>	
<b>Fatherhood-specific direct education</b>	<p>Ideas for programming from community partners included preparation for fatherhood, co-parenting education, and programs for fathers involved in the criminal legal system. Similarly, fathers had ideas for support around general parenting skills (e.g., communication with teens, bullying &amp; depression, sibling rivalry) or family leadership. Includes early preparation for fatherhood and navigating role changes.</p> <p>There were also ideas around helping fathers with basic life skills to help fathers maintain or secure employment, function in a civil society, and maintain relationships and mental health (e.g., postpartum education). Ideas also emerged around career development programs and supporting fathers in securing better paying jobs.</p>
<b>Peer groups</b>	<p>Both community partners and fathers mentioned ideas around peer mentoring, or father-centered groups supporting each other. Other similar ideas included shared spaces for fathers to talk about related issues (e.g., coparenting) or to share resources, and unstructured social time for fathers.</p>

Code	Definition
<b>Adjustments to current programming</b>	In addition to creating new father-specific programming, several ideas emerged around ways to adjust current or new programming to be more inclusive of fathers. Fathers also emphasized promoting programming in different ways so they are aware of what is available. Several ideas emerged around how to make programming more inclusive of fathers, such as hiring more male staff, so they feel more comfortable attending or feel that the program is relevant to them.
<b>SYSTEM OR COMMUNITY LEVEL</b>	
<b>Providing fatherhood resources</b>	Opportunities to support fathers through partnering with the community to provide necessary resources. This includes child care, employment support, and support for fathers in navigating the legal system (e.g., child support, custody). Fathers were also seeking more father-child events or better access to activities to do with their children.
<b>Valuing fatherhood and fathers</b>	This included ideas around helping existing organizations and systems understand the value of fathers and fatherhood, which also includes acknowledging or changing gender norms that influence how fathers access programs and resources.

# Guiding Questions for Community Partner Interviews

## Introduction:

### Brief discussion of the purpose of the interview:

University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension is conducting a needs assessment for the purpose of identifying how we can better support Wisconsin fathers.

## Interview Questions:

1. In an ideal environment, what does successful fatherhood look like to you? (Conversational question for *both* the interviewer and interviewee)
  - **Optional probes:** What are those fathers doing? What is their role?
  - **Probe if not captured:** And why do you think it's important to have involved/ engaged/ successful fathers?
2. Please *briefly* tell us about yourself and your organization/business/agency. Broadly, what *roles or responsibilities* related to supporting parents and families does your organization have?
3. Please describe any programs or services in your organization that are either specifically directed toward fathers or that contain a fatherhood component.
  - Describe programs/services geared towards fatherhood that you know about in your county/ community.
  - Are there any existing successful programs, services, or initiatives in your community that could be *expanded* to include a fatherhood component? If so, what are they?
  - What do you know about fathers' utilization of these services?
    - » Why do you think some fathers are not utilizing them?
    - » What's *working well* in terms of utilization?
4. What are the major issues or concerns that you hear about from fathers in the community?
  - What are the biggest *barriers* that prevent fathers from being involved or engaged with their children?
  - What supports do fathers want to be successful
5. Please rate **your** level of concern about father involvement in your community. Would you say your level of concern is:
  - Very high
  - Somewhat high
  - Somewhat low
  - Very low



6. Please rate the level of concern **in the community** at large of the importance of father involvement. Would you say it is:
  - Very high
  - Somewhat high
  - Somewhat low
  - Very low
7. Based on what your organization does and what our organization does, and what we know of other father-serving organizations in the area, **what gaps in programs or services for fathers exist in the community?**
8. What barrier(s) do you face when assisting and providing services to parents and families? What *external factors* interfere with your ability to successfully work with fathers? Or support your work?
9. Brainstorming question around addressing barriers or filling in gaps)
  - How would you go about developing community resources for fathers? What would some of those resources be?
  - What would be some effective strategies to promote responsible fatherhood in your sector?
10. Are you aware of other leaders/members in your org or the community who might be interested in/committed to addressing this issue? (Are there certain people, associations, or organizations that you recommend we should contact as part of this process? How can we best reach them?
11. Are you interested in collaborating with us? Or further communication/coordination?
  - (Educators don't need to say this, but options could be that they have data to point us towards, they want to collaborate on the next phase of the needs assessment, they want to collaborate on offering programs in the future, they have someone to recommend we talk to as part of the needs assessment)

# Focus Group Discussion Guide

## Welcome and Introduction

Introduce moderator/s and tech support person and provide background information about UW Madison Extension parenting programming

## Topic

The results of this focus group will be used to inform how to best serve fathers in their parenting role. Fathers have some unique needs and we are interested in providing initiatives specific to fathers. We want to be thoughtful about how we do this and want to make sure that what we develop is based on what fathers tell us about their experiences.

You were selected because we want to hear from fathers themselves. Understanding that every father has unique life circumstances, each focus group is composed of fathers with similar life circumstances.

## Guidelines

- Participation is completely voluntary.
- There are no right or wrong answers, only differing points of view
- We are recording, and once the recording is typed up, we will delete the recording
- One person speaking at a time
- Our role as moderators will be to guide the discussion
- This is a discussion that will be prompted by questions, talk to each other

## Discussion questions

1. Please introduce yourself and the ages of your children.

### vision for fatherhood

2. What does being a father mean to you? Think about the men in your lives that had or have a positive influence on you. What qualities did/do they have?

### strengths/challenges

3. What makes you proud as a father or what do you do well in that role?
  - a) *(if needed)* What would your family or friends or co-workers say your value or strengths are as a father?
4. What are some of the most challenging things about being a parent?

5. What is standing in your way, if anything, of being the kind of parent you want to be?
  - a) Probe around **internal** factors like self esteem vs **external** factors like mother of child / court system
6. *(if time)* When you are facing these challenges, who, if anyone, do you talk with?
  - a) If people are quiet, the facilitator can say "If you don't talk with anyone, we want to know that information as well."

### **support needed to be a successful fathers**

Parents have many needs - could be about the development of a child, or having support as a parent, or sometimes navigating the legal system.

7. What services or organizations do you know about that could support you as a parent or as a father?
8. For this question we'd like to hear from everyone. Have you ever reached out or participated in any of the services provided by these organizations?
9. *Only ask these if there's about 30 minutes or more left in the focus group. We need at least 20 minutes for the last section, below.*
  - a) For those of you that have, let's discuss a little further. What was that experience like?
  - b) If you haven't reached out or participated, how come? What gets in the way of accessing services and support you may need as a father?

### **other things needed**

After having this discussion, and thinking about all the things that make fathers valuable,

10. What, if any, do you see as your biggest needs, as a father, for you today?
11. What kind of support/services would you want to receive? What kind of programs would you like to attend?
12. How would you like to get information?
13. We have ideas on several ways to support fathers and get information to them. What would you be the most willing to participate in or receive?
  - a) In-person classes
  - b) Online classes
  - c) Dad cafe/peer groups
  - d) Podcasts
  - e) Emails or text messages



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