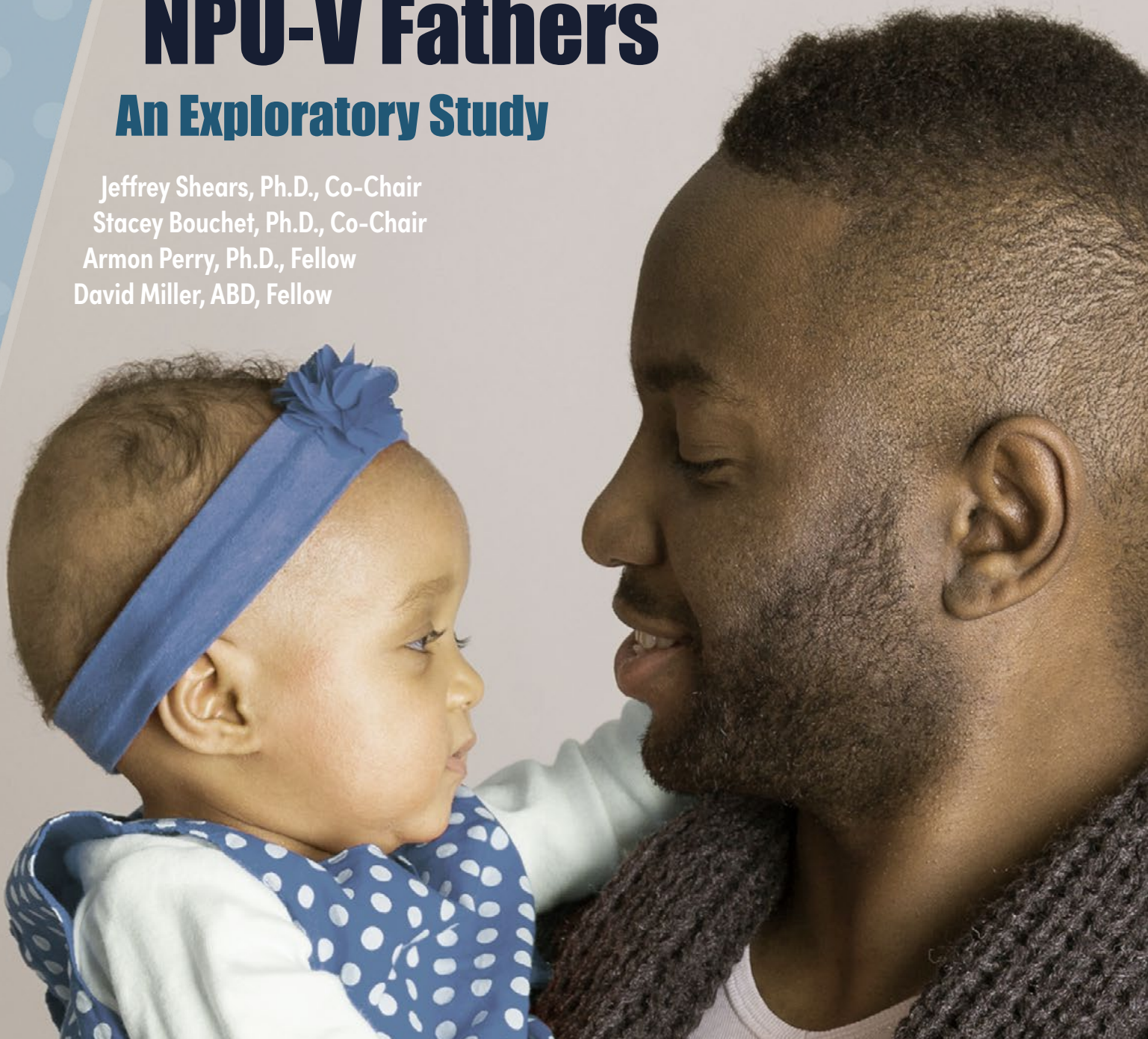


OCTOBER 2021

THE EXPERIENCES & NEEDS of Atlanta's Young NPU-V Fathers

An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

The Neighborhood Planning Unit V (NPU-V) community is a historically urban, Black community in the greater Atlanta Metropolitan area. The demographics of the community indicate a highly concentrated population of low-income, single, female-headed households. Thus, it is imperative that the experiences of fathers in the NPU-V and their ability to contribute to their children's well-being is explored. With the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation and under the direction and management of Fathers Incorporated, the Moynihan Institute for Fatherhood Research and Policy assembled a research team to conduct the present study on NPU-V fathers. Specifically, using qualitative data analysis, this study sought to 1) determine what community supports exist to support men as fathers in the NPU-V, and 2) explore the lived experiences of being a father in this community. Qualitative analysis uncovered rich data related to the participants' lived experiences as Black men and fathers living in the NPU-V. Several significant themes emerged from the fathers' narratives: 1) Fathers experience significant fear about how to be a good parent; 2) Fathers experience negative stigmatization associated with their identities and role as Black fathers; and 3) There is a dearth of supportive services in the NPU-V for fathers that can help them navigate fatherhood and other challenges. This exploratory research makes a needed contribution to the literature and documentation about NPU-V families and conditions, which does not include a focus on fathers, particularly young fathers, as potential contributors to their families and community.

Introduction

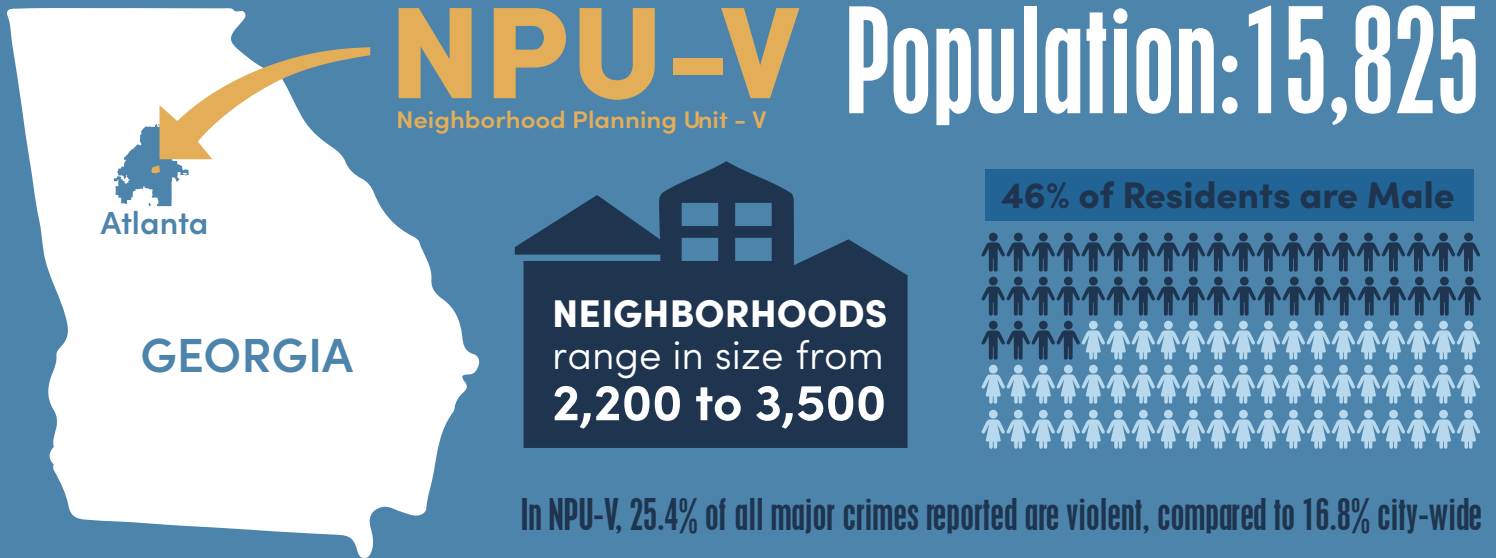
Research has highlighted the importance of fathers in the lives of children (Morgan-Wilson et al., 2016; Yogman & Garfield, 2016; Meuwissen, & Englund, 2016; Ransaw, 2018). Typically, however, fathers are not included as a population of focus in policies, programs, or interventions dedicated to family strengthening and child development. This failure to focus on fathers runs counter to the empirical research suggesting dads are significant contributors to positive child development (Randles, 2020; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020; Cabrera, 2020). Additionally, research revealing the bi-directional influences between mother and father parenting behaviors supports the notion that programs with a dedicated father component will lead to more sensitive mothering, supporting an even greater likelihood of positive child development (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004).

It is becoming widely documented and accepted that fathers are significant to children and positive outcomes for children increase when there is a positively involved father. Research also demonstrates that a father's influence plays an important role in decreasing internalizing and externalizing behaviors in youth (Ruhland et al., 2020; Wasserman et al., 2021); specifically, decreased behavioral problems in boys and fewer psychological difficulties in girls (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008). Further, father absence has been found to be associated with the formation of unhealthy attachment styles developed in early childhood that can lead to future low self-esteem (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005), substance use (Fergusson, Horwood, & Ridder, 2007), mental illness (Marsee, Silverthorn, & Frick, 2005), increased aggression in adolescence, and the inability to establish and maintain healthy romantic relationships as an adult.

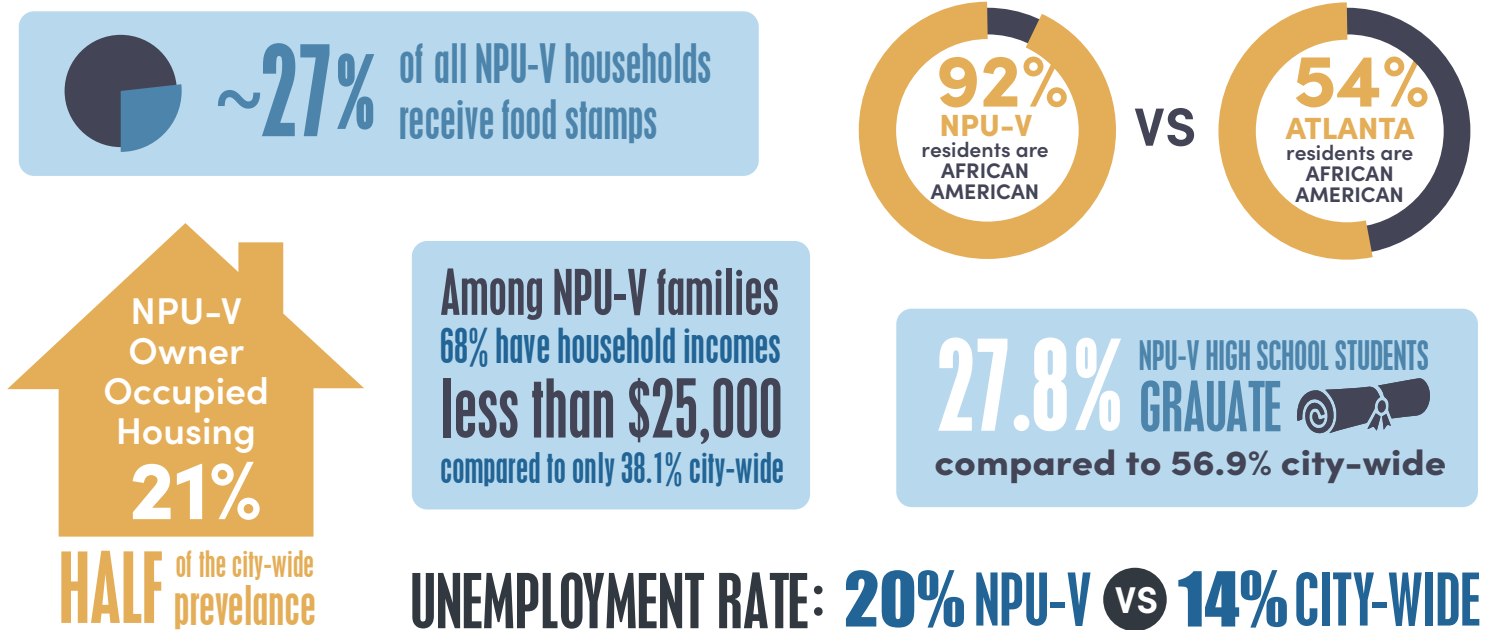
Assessing the Needs of Fathers in the NPU-V: Methods

The NPU-V was selected as the area of study because of its social and economic statistical disparities with broader metro Atlanta.

According to the 2000 Census:



Median Household Income in NPU-V is \$27,276



greater metropolitan area has a median income of **\$70,250** | **36%** of most NPU-V residents have incomes at or below area median income

In addition to demographic information, engaging the community in understanding its residents' specific needs before beginning the implementation of services or supports is fundamental. This may be even more important when it comes to fathers given the various numbers of emerging programs

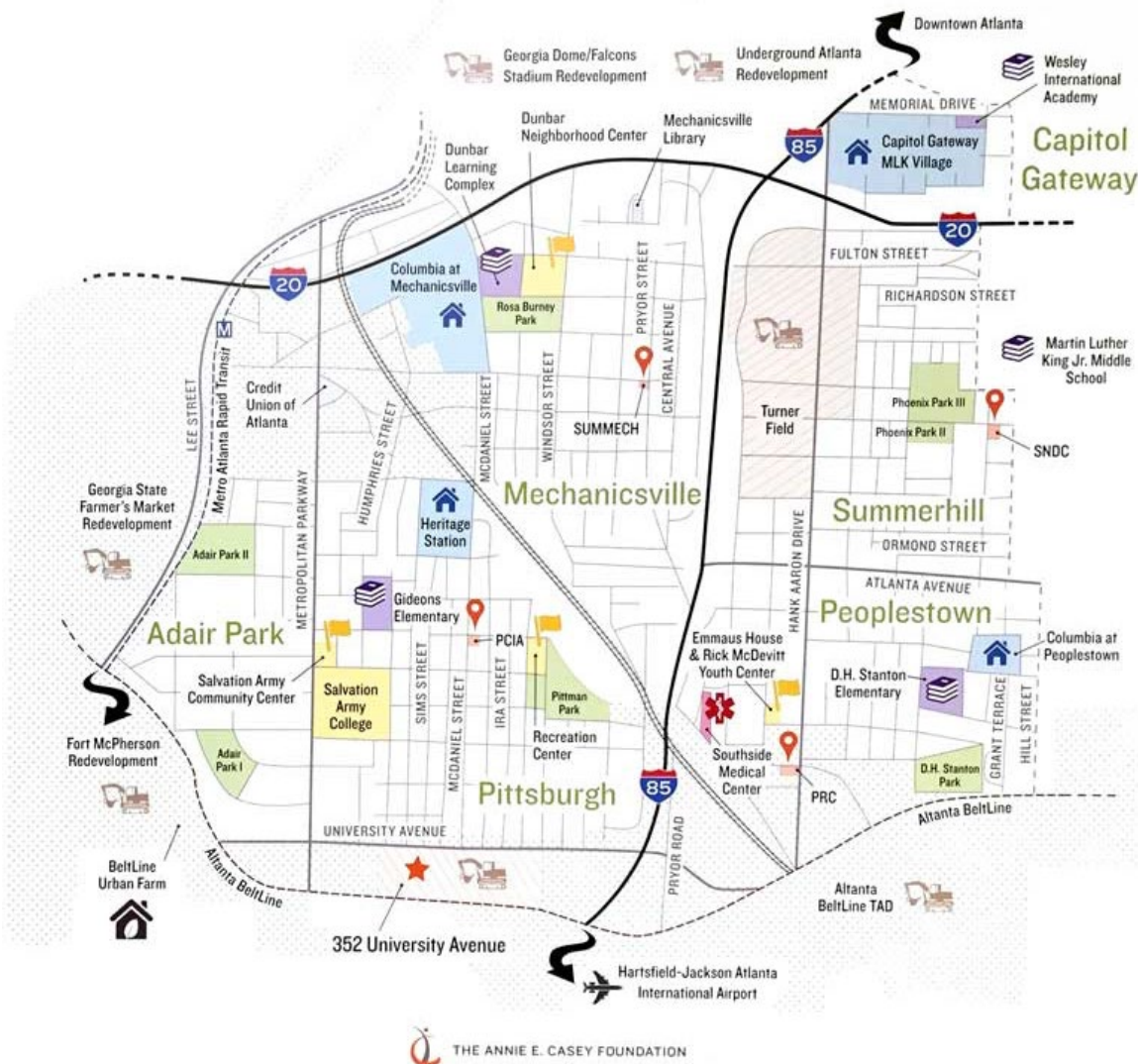
that have multiple components or areas of focus and the multidimensional needs of fathers. The objectives of this study were to understand the lived experiences of young, Black fathers and what supports were available to assist them in their fathering roles.

SAMPLE

Men were recruited who self-identified as a Black father between the ages of 18 and 30 who lived, worked, or worshiped in the NPU-V community and had a child under 18 years of age. Using purposive sampling protocol men, were recruited in the NPU-V community through neighborhood churches, barbershops, community centers, and outreach on various social media platforms. The Fathers Incorporated database was also used to recruit men who resided in the project's targeted zip codes. The target population came from

the following zip codes: 30304, 30310, 30312, 30314, 30315, which correspond to the six Atlanta neighborhoods that make up the NPU-V: Adair Park, Mechanicsville, Peoplestown, Pittsburgh, Summerhill, and Capitol Gateway (see map below).

The study consisted of n=13 total participants who met the recruitment criteria. Participants reported having an average of 3.53 children who ranged in age from being unborn (i.e., expectant fathers) to 17 years old.



PROCEDURES

Three focus groups (n=4, n=4, and n=6) were conducted virtually by Dr. Jeffery Shears, who serves as a co-investigator for the present study, and Lawrence Wilbon, the Project Director for Fathers Incorporated. Both of these men identify as a Black fathers. Each participant received a fifty-dollar gift certificate for his participation in the focus group.

During the virtual focus groups, men were allowed to mute their video and only participate using the audio system. However, it should be noted that the interviewer remained on video in an attempt to visually connect with participants.

Fathers were asked the following semi-structured questions:

1. **Regarding the NPU-V community, what do men need to be an impactful father?**
2. **What have your experiences as a father been in the NPU-V?**
3. **What community supports are available to help you do or navigate your job as a father in the NPU-V?**
4. **What additional community supports are needed for fathers in the NPU-V?**
5. **How has your affiliation with the NPU-V enhanced or limited your ability to do your job as a father?**

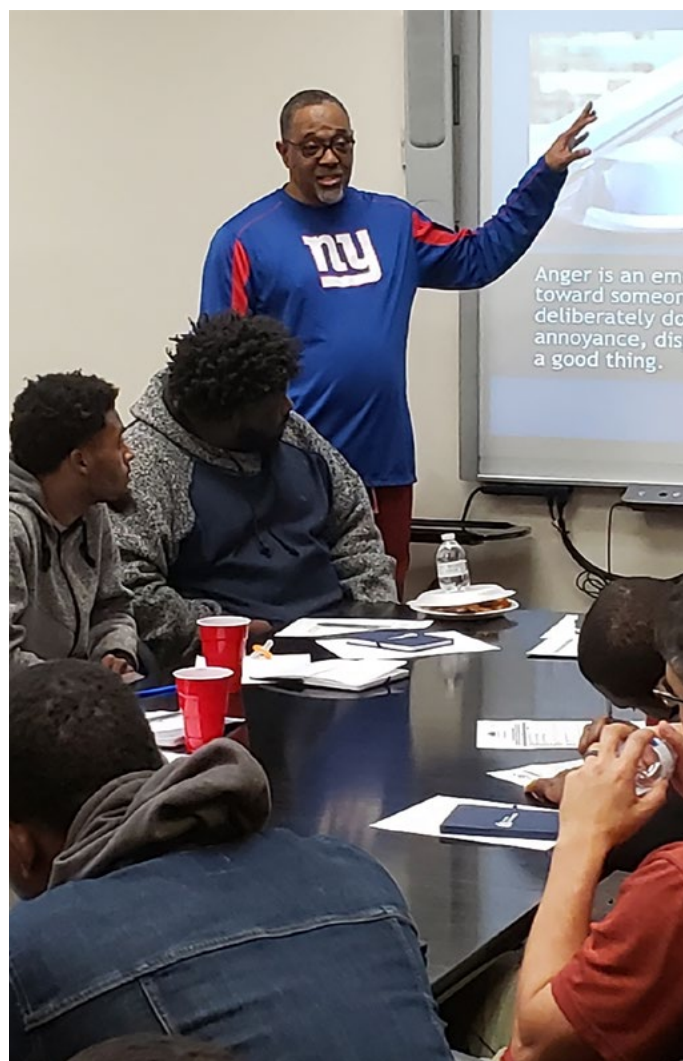
DATA ANALYSIS

The focus group interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to increase the validity and reliability of the data analyses. Data analyses included coding the focus group interviews based on emerging concepts and themes gleaned from study participants. The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1988).

This method included:

1. **Identifying concepts from the data that are related to the research questions;**
2. **Checking frequency and distribution of the concepts;**
3. **Assembling a variety of evidence to support the observations; and**
4. **incorporating these concepts into a refined conceptual framework or “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).**

To ensure reliability and accuracy results of coding, the following reliability procedures were used: 1) members of the research team had regular, documented meetings to analyze data and 2) cross-check codes were developed by the respective co-investigators and results were compared that were independently derived.



FEAR AND FATHERING

The transition to parenthood has been identified as one that brings with it significant stress. Similarly, the fathers in the focus groups expressed concerns about myriad topics related to their experiences as fathers. Most often, these concerns centered on the trepidation that the men felt because many of them did not have active fathers in their lives as children. This was particularly true of men who became fathers as teenagers. Consequently, they questioned how effective they could be as fathers absent having had a positive role model. In expressing these feelings, several men described fathering as an “emotional roller coaster.” In other cases, fathers were anxious because their status as young men without a lot of formal education placed them in precarious positions regarding their ability to provide financially for their children. Consider this quote from one such father who stated, “I was so young. I had to find ways to make money.” However,

despite the challenges they faced, and the anxiety brought on by those challenges, the men remained resilient and worked to maintain an active presence in their children’s lives. This sentiment was best expressed by a father who shed light on the weight of fathering when he stated,

“I am **EXCITED**
and scared
because I might screw up
these kids’ life.
But at the same time,
I have to do
THE BEST I CAN,
especially having girls.”





STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH BLACK FATHERS

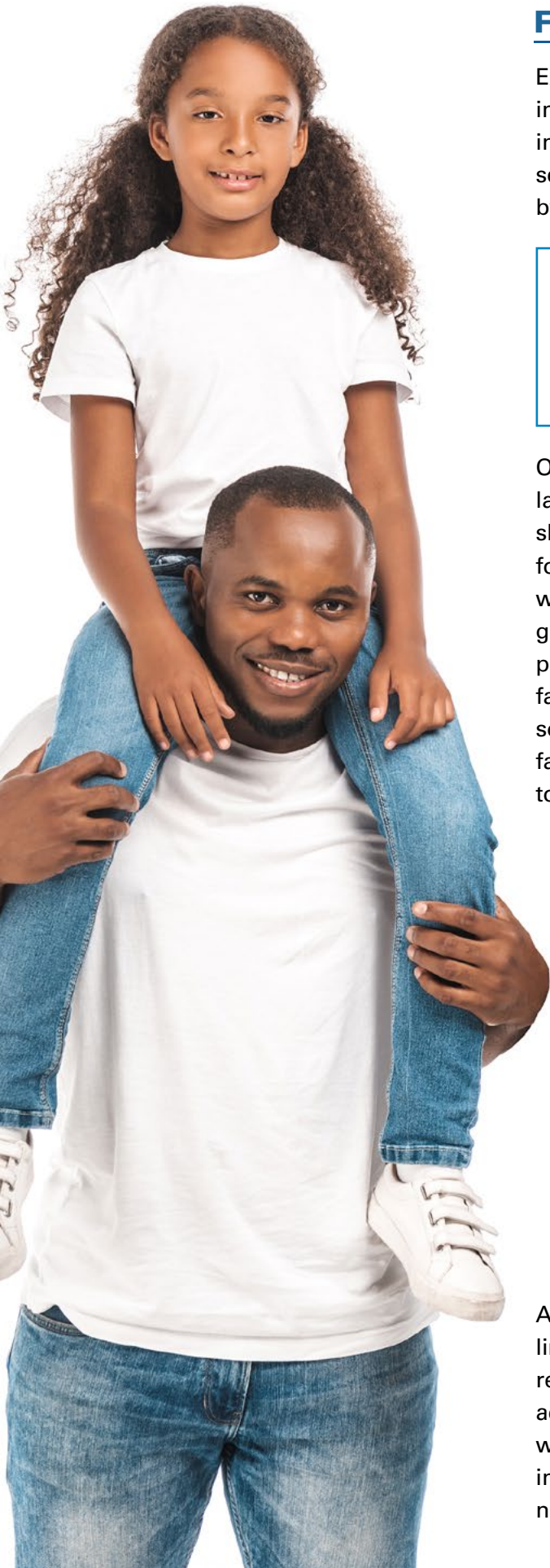
Beyond the anxiety and concern that comes along with fathering, the participants in this study also spoke specifically about the deleterious impact of the stigma that they face as Black fathers. One father stated succinctly,

“Black fathers do not get recognized for being fathers. Everything goes to mothers.”

In detailing the origin of the stigma as well as its impact, several fathers lamented the lack of fathers’ engagement in the NPU-V sharing that, “In my community, most homes are broken” and that “dads not being there is getting to be too much of the norm.” According to the fathers we talked with, the result has been that society has extrapolated beyond their own networks or experiences and has developed broader narratives about Black fathers that frame them as invisible. To illuminate this point, one participant remarked, “people think

Black fathers don’t take care about their kids, so why should we even help them.” As we learn in the subsequent sections, the lack of services for fathers is something that they were certainly aware of that made navigating the rigors of parenting more difficult to traverse.





FATHERS AND SUPPORT SERVICES

Exacerbating the fears related to fathering and the negative impact of race-based stigma stemming from the real or perceived invisibility of Black fathers was the dearth of available supportive services to participants in the NPU-V to assist fathers. Put plainly by one participant,

**“For lack of a better term,
there is no welfare system for men
that I can think of.”**

Other participants went into a little more detail. One participant lamented the disparities in supports for men vis-à-vis women sharing, “I have yet to see anything specifically catered to me and for fathers. I see stuff for women all the time; churches are taking women, but nothing [for] me. Nothing for us.” Another participant goes a step further implicating public assistance and safety net programs’ eligibility criteria that seem to unfairly disadvantage fathers and discourage their participation in family life. In doing so, he highlighted the experiences of a family member whose family felt compelled to portray him as having a diminished role to qualify for assistance:

My cousin is married. There have been a few times dealing with DFAC that her and her husband did not have anything and they did not get approved because they were literally \$200 over the budget or really like incremental amounts. So she ends up going back saying she is separated, a single mother, and they overnight[ed] her food stamps.

Across the focus groups, there was consensus that there was limited access to support services and programs for fathers. This reality, combined with the fact that many of the men did not have active fathers themselves or did not have a lot of connections with other fathers, meant that the men had to be creative and innovative in manufacturing the development of an informal network to support their parenting efforts.

NAVIGATING FATHERHOOD

In response to living and working in the NPU-V, an area that was described as bereft of formal resources to support fathering, the participants talked about how they managed the rigors associated with parenting. The final, emergent theme centered on the strategies that the men used to navigate fatherhood. Despite facing economic disadvantage, stigma and oppression, and limited access to support services, the fathers still attempted to remain resilient by staying active in their children's lives. As they shared these stories, the men spoke about how they worked to maximize their effectiveness as parents. In doing so, the fathers explained how they created networks consisting of relatives and fictive kin. The following quote exemplifies this strategy.

“[I] had my first baby at 15. My mother and grandmother were big supporters.

I did not have a father, but the men at my school helped me and told me to keep my head up.”

In addition to the informal networks, a few of the fathers also shared their efforts to leverage their co-parenting relationships to maintain access to their children. According to one of the fathers, “My youngest daughter’s mother learned my background—‘You doing the same thing your daddy did.’--We just doing what we learned. We need to find ways to communicate other than chastis[ing] and whipping.” Unfortunately, not all the fathers had functional co-parenting relationships with their children’s mothers. In these cases, fathers experienced significant barriers to establishing and maintaining an active role in their children’s lives. In fact, several fathers spoke at length about the difficulties they had in

getting access to their children. Most often, these challenges were accompanied by discussions about the ways in which fathers are treated by the court. As stated by one father,

“It’s tough. If we know that’s my baby and my name is on the birth certificate, why do I have to go through the legitimization process. Makes me pay more money that we barely have.”



Considering all the challenges that the fathers faced and the limited resources available to assist them, the fathers expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to enroll in the Gentle Warriors (GWA) Fatherhood Program. For them, the GWA program represented a supportive oasis in what was otherwise a fatherhood resource desert.

“If it was not for the fatherhood program, I would not have anything to help me with my child.”

Another man stated,

“FATHERS need this kind of program at birth, so when stuff happens, we know our rights and do not have to fight for our rights.”

As evidenced by the excerpts from these focus groups, the participants desired to maintain active roles in their children’s lives. In the face of significant barriers and limited resources, the fathers sought to rise above their circumstances to be there for their children. Fortunately, the GWA program is attempting to fill the void regarding supportive services to help the fathers’ increase their capacity. As one father shared, “I haven’t given up yet, and I still try to communicate and do what I can until that day comes when I can have 3 of my children together one year. And that’s why I am here in this program.”

Policy Implications

Over the past few decades, increased interest at the federal and state level in father involvement has created greater awareness of the role of fathers in child development. The creation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (RFP) and specific services dedicated to supporting low-income fathers has increased over the last few decades (Holmes et al., 2020). There also has been increasing support for the needs of minority fathers. For example, Fathers Incorporated was awarded a five-million-dollar grant to provide services to over 900 fathers in the metro Atlanta area with a focus on assisting men with responsible parenting and healthy marriage/relationships.

Many of the findings in the study stress the importance of supporting low-income, Black fathers along their fatherhood journey through increasing community-based support for young fathers, addressing stigmas Black fathers face, and providing equal access to social services. Further exploration and research are needed to better understand father involvement and family dynamics among low-income Black fathers, particularly as they relate to co-parenting and fathers’ ability to have legal rights to see his child. Of particular importance is further examination of the legitimization policy and process. Legitimation is the legal process for a non-married dad in the

State of Georgia to become the legal father of his child. If the parents have never been married, Georgia law presumes the biological father is not the legal father of the child. This legitimization policy puts unmarried dads at risk of not having access to their children or a legal say in the decisions that affect them but keeps them deeply indebted to them financially. It is well documented that many low-income Black fathers struggle with economic and social challenges that impact their ability to parent. From navigating systems like child support to managing co-parenting relationships with the mothers of their children, low-income, Black fathers’ narratives are seldom highlighted.

The objectives of this study were to hear from fathers about the support services available to them as fathers in their community and to explore their lived experiences of fathering in the NPU-V. Understanding more about the motivations of fathers and their perceived needs is important to establishing a community of support for dads. Data obtained through this study will enable the community to take the pulse of local fathers to triage and better gauge needed services and policies. The hope is that this research will drive new programming and policy levers reflective of the local needs of fathers. Implications for policy change and future research are also potential outcomes.

ATLANTA FATHERHOOD RESOURCES

Cool Dads Rock	http://www.cooldadsrock.com/index.html
Gentle Warriors Academy	https://fatherhoodisbrotherhood.com
Fathers Incorporated	https://www.fathersincorporated.com/
Fathers Matter ATL	https://www.msm.edu/
I'm A Father First	https://imafatherfirst.org/
Let Us Make Man	https://www.letusmakeman.net/
Ryan Cameron Foundation	https://www.ryancameron.org/
Sheltering Arms	https://shelteringarmsforkids.com/

LEGITIMATION RESOURCES

Legitimation Awareness Training	https://vimeo.com/588627224/1424c9df50
Legitimation Radio Ad	https://vimeo.com/608680979/03e6c78948
Gary Freeman	https://vimeo.com/606981593/00b55a53fb

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The production of this report was made possible by the generous support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation - Atlanta Civic Site.