



# SUPPORTING YOUNG ADULT FATHERS

## Equity in Advocacy Series, Fact Sheet #14

October 2020

This fact sheet is the fourteenth in the *Racial Equity in Advocacy* series for social policy advocates addressing unequal opportunities by race. Each fact sheet will provide information equipping advocates to embed a racial equity lens into their work to close gaps and improve outcomes for communities of color. Please see the [first fact sheet](#) in the series for a review of key terms and concepts.

The value of fathers cannot be understated. A significant number of children are born to young adult fathers. While the challenges and needs of mothers have been well-documented, fathers have not received the same level of attention. Both genders have similar needs. This underinvestment in fathers has many risks and consequences for everyone in the family, including father, mother, and child.

Younger fathers are more likely to be Black and Hispanic<sup>i</sup> and society's negative perceptions of young men of color contribute to a disparaging narrative about their interest and ability to parent. The "deadbeat dad" stereotype, perpetuated since the 1980s, has made it more difficult for fathers of color to access safety net programs. Fathers of color care deeply about their children. When compared to White and Hispanic fathers across socioeconomic status, Black fathers are actually equally (or more) involved with their children on a number of activities including feeding, diapering, playing, and reading to them.<sup>ii</sup>

### Access to Safety Net Programs

Poverty and financial distress affect low-income, young adult fathers and young adult mothers in similar ways. Moreover, strict income limitations and other eligibility rules can penalize fathers for being a part of the family unit, thereby adding stressors to young parenting couples. Both custodial and noncustodial young fathers face stigma for attempting to access these services and can encounter service providers who do not want to enroll them or maintain their eligibility.

Public policy in social services typically benefits custodial parents and children. This does not account for the fact that many noncustodial fathers need safety net programs like SNAP and cash assistance. The necessary support frees some of their limited financial resources, allowing them to help their children even more. Anti-poverty programs and entitlements could significantly reduce the economic hardship for young adult fathers and their children experiencing high poverty rates. However, utilization rates are low. Only six percent receive cash assistance, six percent receive child care assistance, 18 percent

receive SNAP, and 23 percent receive WIC. With 31 percent of young adult fathers in poverty, this is a major missed opportunity to help them.<sup>iii</sup>

The following safety net programs currently inadequately serve young adult fathers:

- Unless men live in a state that expanded **Medicaid** (as of the writing of this fact sheet, 12 states have not expanded<sup>iv</sup>), they generally are not eligible for Medicaid (with specific exceptions such as disability or foster care involvement).
- Since more men are noncustodial parents than women, they are more likely to be affected by the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program's (SNAP)** time limit for able-bodied adults without dependents (ABAWDs). ABAWDs are required to work or participate in a work program for at least 20 hours per week in order to receive SNAP benefits for more than three months in a 36-month period.
- **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)** cash assistance is limited to custodial parents. In the case where a young adult father is living with the mother of his child, TANF is still difficult to acquire. TANF requires states to achieve a 90 percent work participation rate for two-parent families, so many states have stopped serving such families through TANF.<sup>v</sup> Furthermore, states have the flexibility to extend TANF-funded employment services to noncustodial parents, but few states have pursued this option.<sup>vi</sup> In addition, the mandatory cooperation requirement between TANF and the Child Support Program creates barriers for young adult fathers to be involved in their children's lives and strain their relationships with the children's mothers. Because Black fathers have disproportionately low-income, Black families are more likely to have informal child financial support arrangements in which the noncustodial parent pays what he can.<sup>vii</sup> However, if a family is still struggling financially, a mother may opt to apply for TANF which forces her to open a Child Support case. Child support orders often require unrealistically large payments from noncustodial parents and have sanctions for nonpayment, such as losing a driver's license and even serving jail time, that can seriously harm a parent's wellbeing.
- The **Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)** is currently limited to individuals over the age of 25 unless they are a custodial parent. Thus, noncustodial young adult fathers are entirely ineligible for this critical income support that has lifted millions of adults and children out of poverty.<sup>viii</sup>

## COVID-19 and Future Directions

The public health response to COVID-19 involving shelter-in-place orders and closing businesses has had many severe economic consequences for working families. The impact is hardest felt among the most vulnerable populations who have the most barriers to employment. Workers in the retail and hospitality industries experienced the highest risk of unemployment and half of workers ages 16-24 work in these industries.<sup>ix</sup> While unemployment rates rose for all racial and ethnic groups following the shelter-in-place orders, it remained higher for youth of color.<sup>x</sup>

From sanction relief in TANF to easing enrollment processes in SNAP, the federal government and states have taken measures to provide relief to families during the dual public health and economic crises. However, young adult fathers have been overlooked in these policies because eligibility rules were not adjusted to include them.

For a young father with low income and limited assets, who is just entering the workforce, these services would meet his basic needs and facilitate his ability to work and provide for his family:

- Increased access to **food** through SNAP, which should not limit benefits if they experience long periods of joblessness. Although the CARES Act suspended the time limit for ABAWDs, this accommodation expires whenever the public health emergency ends. Few states have implemented the optional mandatory cooperation between SNAP and the Child Support Program.<sup>xi</sup> Unfortunately, some policymakers suggest that SNAP drop benefits to noncustodial parents who do not cooperate with Child Support.<sup>xii</sup> Such a policy would not lead to more participation in Child Support, but would hurt low-income, young adult fathers who simply cannot afford to make payments.
- Increased access to **health insurance** through Medicaid expansion so that non-disabled men can qualify. States should not restrict access via work requirements so that male job seekers, including those who cannot find work due to the various barriers they encounter, can still access necessary healthcare.
- Access to **social services**, including employment services through TANF, to provide counseling, job readiness, and employment placement during periods of unemployment. The mandatory cooperation requirement between TANF and the Child Support Program must be ended to strengthen families by providing relief to young adult fathers as well as their children and the mothers of their children.
- Access to **refundable tax credits**, including the EITC, for young noncustodial fathers aged 21-24. By lowering the eligibility age from 25 to 21, noncustodial young adult fathers will keep more of what they earn without being taxed into poverty.

Even before the current dual crises, young adult fathers were struggling to both parent and transition to adulthood with little support. There is a lot of advocacy around the things these young adult fathers need; however, it is missing a fatherhood lens. Social policy advocates concerned about improving outcomes for children and families must factor in young fathers who are a vital part of their children's lives.

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<sup>i</sup> Khandwala, Y. S. et al. (2017). The age of fathers in the USA is rising: an analysis of 168 867 480 births from 1972 to 2015. *Human Reproduction*, 32(10).

<sup>ii</sup> Jones, J. and Mosher, W. D. (2013). *Fathers' Involvement With Their Children: United States, 2006–2010*. National Health Statistics Reports, no 71. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

<sup>iii</sup> National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). (2018). 2015-2017 National Survey of Family Growth Public-Use Data and Documentation. Hyattsville, MD: CDC National Center for Health Statistics. Retrieved from [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/nsfg\\_2015\\_2017\\_puf.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/nsfg_2015_2017_puf.htm).

<sup>iv</sup> Status of State Medicaid Expansion Decisions: Interactive Map. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/status-of-state-medicaid-expansion-decisions-interactive-map/>

<sup>v</sup> Lower-Basch, E. (2018). *TANF 101: Cash Assistance*. Center for Law and Social Policy.

<sup>vi</sup> Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families. (2018, February 14). *The use of TANF funds to promote employment programs for noncustodial parents* (TANF-ACF-IM-2018-01). Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/resource/tanf-acf-im-2018-01the-use-of-tanf-funds-to-promote-employment-programs-for-noncustodial-parents>

<sup>vii</sup> Office of Child Support Enforcement, Administration for Children & Families. (2016, June). *Why Don't More Poor Custodial Parents Have a Child Support Order?* Retrieved from [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/why\\_dont\\_more\\_poor\\_cps\\_have\\_a\\_cs\\_order\\_sbntn\\_6.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/why_dont_more_poor_cps_have_a_cs_order_sbntn_6.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> Lee, H. and Amaechi, A. (November 2016). *EITC Expansion Proposals: What's at Stake for Young Workers*. Center for Law and Social Policy. Retrieved from <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/2014-09-17-Youth-EITC-Young-Workers-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> Inanc, H. (2020). *Breaking down the numbers: What does COVID-19 mean for youth unemployment?* Mathematica. Retrieved from <https://www.mathematica.org/our-publications-and-findings/publications/breaking-down-the-numbers-what-does-covid-19-mean-for-youth-unemployment>

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Llobrera, J. (2020). *Child Support Cooperation Requirements in SNAP Are Unproven, Costly, and Put Families at Risk*. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Retrieved from <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/child-support-cooperation-requirements-in-snap-are-unproven-costly-and-put>

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.