

## **COVID-19 and Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers**

### **Task 14: 2020–2022 Child Support Policy Research Agreement**

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## INTRODUCTION

Low-income and noncustodial fathers have faced exceptional challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenges for these fathers have included intensified work-family conflict, changes in visitation schedules, and overall well-being and mental health deterioration, as well as job loss, growing child support arrears, and delays in reevaluation of child support orders (Iztayeva, 2021). These challenges have added strain to co-parenting relationships (Peltz et al., 2021), increased co-parental conflict, and decreased support resources, which threatens to compound the losses and disruptions experienced by children during the pandemic (Prime et al., 2020).

The largest city in Wisconsin, Milwaukee is one of the nation's most racially segregated cities (Levine, 2020). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Black communities in the city were the hardest hit by the virus (Muñoz-Price et al., 2020). Milwaukee joins other urban settings in bearing disproportionate burdens during the pandemic including high COVID-19 infection rates, high proportion of residents in high-risk employment, delayed vaccine roll-out and adoption processes, and a disproportionate number of deaths in low-income Black communities (Harris 2020; Bermanian et al., 2020). Black fathers in particular are likely to be employed in high-risk environments in regard to COVID-19 exposure and infection, impacting individual and family wellbeing (Cooper et al., 2021). Emerging research is beginning to suggest some common difficulties for fathers during the pandemic (Iztayeva, 2021; Peltz et al., 2021), but little research has focused on the lived experience of Black fathers during the pandemic, particularly those with less than full custody of their children.

In this study, we explored pandemic-related difficulties among vulnerable fathers in Milwaukee, including new or heightened financial and parenting challenges and challenges

accessing needed services. We conducted an online survey and a series of in-person and virtual focus group discussions to learn about challenges related to loss of employment, hours, or income, child support obligations, visitation or shared custody, accessing child support agencies and family courts, and father-child and co-parent relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. This report presents key findings from the survey and focus groups, and implications for policy, practice, and research, with an emphasis on enhancing the capacity of child support agencies to serve vulnerable fathers.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this study, we conducted both a survey and focus groups because the two data collection methods yield uniquely useful and complementary data. Survey data were collected to assess changes in fathers' economic circumstances and social conditions during the pandemic and factors associated with pandemic-incurred changes. Focus group data were collected to gain deeper insight into fathers' experiences during the pandemic, including experiences related to work, parenting, health, and relationships. Combined, these two data sources provide both a broad and deep understanding of pandemic-related difficulties among Milwaukee fathers. Further, this mixed methods approach allowed for research participants to have a voice in clarifying and elaborating findings. For example, survey findings revealed that some fathers spent considerably more time with their children during the pandemic due to school and daycare closures. Through the focus groups, we gained better understanding of which fathers, under which conditions, were able to spend more time with their children during the pandemic, and we learned about the meaning that fathers attribute to the experience of additional time spent with children.

## **Recruitment**

We leveraged an existing, multi-partner initiative in Milwaukee to engage disadvantaged fathers in this research. The Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative (MFI) is an interdepartmental collaborative with The Mayor's Office and Housing Authority of Milwaukee, that works closely with father- and family-serving agencies throughout the city. MFI offers programs that primarily support low-income, African American fathers who do not have full custody of their children. We recruited participants through MFI and its partner organizations. MFI Executive Director Darryl Davidson and his staff provided critical support for the study through their dedicated recruitment efforts.

Recruitment for this study occurred between July 2021–January 2022. Initial recruitment focused on survey participants. Appendix C presents the recruitment flyer for the survey component of the study. Mr. Davidson circulated study information to MFI program participants multiple times between July–October. He also shared recruitment materials with partner organizations in Milwaukee (including Fathers Making Progress, The DAD Project, My Father's House, St. Charles Youth and Family Services, and New Concept Self Development Center) for dissemination, and issued regular reminders to the leaders of these organizations to disseminate study information at monthly collaborative meetings and via email. MFI and other father-serving organizations disseminated study information to program participants by circulating flyers, including information in newsletters, posting on social media, and through announcements at program events. Recruitment began slowly and then we experienced a surge in study enrollment when the MFI disseminated study information to fathers who had registered to attend the Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit on October 8–9, 2021.

Prior to the Summit, 50 fathers completed the survey. At that time, we had sufficient data to refine plans for the focus groups (we used initial findings to guide final adjustments to the

focus group protocol) and we scheduled three focus groups to coincide with the Fatherhood Summit. Appendix D presents a sample focus group flyer (a tailored flyer was created for each focus group, with relevant details of date, time, and location). Due to ongoing COVID-19 considerations, the 2021 Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit was a hybrid event. Typically, the event is in-person and draws a crowd of hundreds. In 2021, the first day of the Summit was held in-person with a registration cap of 75. The second day of the Summit was conducted online, via Zoom. MFI shared information about the three focus groups with fathers registered to attend the Fatherhood Summit, and fathers signed up to attend a morning or afternoon in-person focus group on October 8 in a private room at the Milwaukee Area Technical College downtown campus where the Summit was held, or an online focus group on October 9. At both in-person and online focus groups, we invited focus group participants to complete the survey if they had not yet done so and would like to do so. On the first day of the Fatherhood Summit and at one subsequent in-person focus group, we brought laptops and arrived early and stayed late so that focus group participants could take the online survey if they wished using a provided laptop. Most, but not all, focus group participants completed the survey either prior to or on the day of their focus group participation, such that there is significant overlap between the focus group and survey samples. Following the Summit, recruitment continued through January for both the survey component of the study and three additional focus groups. MFI and its partner organizations all made important contributions to recruitment; focus group participants let us know they had learned about the study from every one of the organizations that had committed to support recruitment.

## **Recruitment Difficulties and Adjustments to Plan**

In our initial research plan we stated that we would attempt to survey 150 fathers and hold 3–4 focus groups of 6–8 participants (for a total of 24 fathers participating in focus groups). After the Summit, though MFI and partner organizations continued to promote the study, survey recruitment was extremely slow. By late October, despite intensive recruitment efforts underway since July, survey participation was lower than we hoped. However, response to recruitment efforts for the focus groups exceeded expectations. With approval from BCS, we updated our research plan to increase the number of focus groups as an alternative to pursuing additional survey responses. We stated that we would attempt to survey 75 fathers and hold 6 focus groups of 6–8 participants (for a total of 40 fathers participating in focus groups). Ultimately, we successfully recruited 79 fathers to complete the survey and completed 6 focus groups with a total of 38 fathers. This approach yielded more very rich information from focus groups in lieu of additional sample size via surveys.

Upon reflection and consultation with our community partners, we believe that literacy level, tech literacy level, and preferred means of communication, are among the reasons that fathers responded more enthusiastically to the opportunity to participate in focus group discussions than the opportunity to complete the online survey. When fathers took the survey using laptops that we provided at in-person focus groups, some fathers asked for assistance reading survey items and we observed that some fathers had difficulty navigating with the mouse and advancing to the next page when needed. In focus groups, we found that fathers were eager to join in conversation and valued the opportunity to connect with other fathers and discuss shared experiences. In recent months, MFI has hosted a series of “Real Men Real Talk” community conversations that have drawn a large and growing, highly engaged crowd, and our

focus groups may similarly serve as a valued opportunity for men to discuss the issues that affect them every day.

An additional likely barrier to survey recruitment was the need for interested fathers to contact the study team for eligibility screening in order to receive a link to complete the survey. An open survey link included in recruitment fliers may have facilitated greater participation by saving the step of contacting the study team. However, based on Dr. Walsh's recent experience recruiting participants for another study in Milwaukee, as well as consultation with the UW–Madison Survey Center, we determined that eligibility screening by the study team was a necessary step to prevent an influx of fraudulent responses (seeking the \$25 incentive) and ensure the integrity of the data. We did not face the same dilemma with focus group recruitment, as focus group participation required fathers to show up in person or via zoom and relate their experiences, whereas the online survey could have been completed by people who did not meet the study criteria, by the same individual multiple times, or by bots.

## **Participants**

Inclusion criteria for both components of the study required that the participant was 18 years of age or older, a resident of Milwaukee County, and a father to one or more minor children and/or expecting a child at the time of their participation. Consistent with the population of fathers served by the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative, our partner in recruitment, a majority of study participants identified as Black and reported some college or less as highest educational attainment. About two thirds of participants had children living outside of their household.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>About 1/3 of participants do not currently have children living outside of their household, and thus child support is not currently relevant for these fathers. We include them in this study because some of them did have children living elsewhere in the recent past and have experience with child support, and some of the fathers who currently have only co-resident children will be noncustodial parents in the future, given high rates of relationship dissolution in the United States (Andersson et al., 2017).

Additional information about individual and family characteristics of the survey and focus group samples is provided in Table 1. As described below, there is substantial overlap between the survey and focus group samples and the two groups are broadly similar (e.g., 77.2% of the survey sample identify as Black compared to 89.4% of the focus group sample, 50.6% of the survey sample report some college or less as compared to 57.9% of the focus group sample). We do not know income information for the survey sample but based on utilizing the same recruitment strategy for both survey and focus group participation, and based on the population of fathers served by the organizations that supported recruitment, we expect that the survey sample was broadly similar to the focus group sample in terms of income distribution (31.6% of focus group participants reported household income of less than \$25,000, 15.8% reported household income of \$25,000–\$49,999, 15.8% reported household income of \$50,000–\$99,999, 26.3% reported household income above \$100,000, and 10.5% did not provide household income).



**Table 1: Individual and Family Characteristics of Survey (N=79) and Focus Group (N=38) Respondents**

	Survey		Focus Group	
	Observations	%	Observations	%
<b>Respondents</b>	79		38	
<b>Age</b>				
21–30	10	13%	4	11%
31–40	29	37%	10	26%
41–50	26	33%	16	42%
51–60	8	10%	3	8%
No Response	5	6%	5	13%
<b>Number of Children</b>				
1	19	24%	7	18%
2	23	29%	8	21%
3	8	10%	4	11%
4 +	27	34%	9	24%
No Response	2	3%	10	26%
<b>Race</b>				
Black or African American	61	77%	34	89%
White	10	13%	0	0%
Multi-Racial	1	1%	1	3%
Other	3	4%	1	3%
No Response	4	5%	2	5%
<b>Education</b>				
Some College or Less	40	51%	22	58%
4-Year Degree or More	36	46%	14	37%
No Response	3	4%	2	5%
<b>Relationship Status</b>				
Single (Never Married, Divorced, Widowed)	27	34%	18	47%
In a Relationship (Married, Domestic Partnership, Unmarried Couple)	48	61%	18	47%
No Response	4	5%	2	6%
<b>Employment Status</b>				
Employed Full-Time	49	62%	23	60%
Employed Part-Time	4	5%	4	11%
Self-Employed	8	10%	0	0%
Unemployed	18	23%	9	24%
No Response	0	0%	2	5%
<b>Children Living Part- or Full-Time in Another Household</b>				
Yes			24	25%
No			12	32%
No Response			2	5%
<b>Income</b>				
< 25,000			12	32%
25,000–50,000			6	16%
50,000–100,000			6	16%
>100,000			10	26%
No Response			4	10%

## **Data Collection Procedures**

Survey data was collected via an online survey using the survey platform Qualtrics. Recruitment materials included information about the study and contact information to contact the study team to confirm eligibility and enroll in the study. Following eligibility screening, participants were provided with the Qualtrics link to complete the survey. Upon entering the study in Qualtrics, participants were presented with informed consent information and then the survey itself. Survey domains included individual and household demographic characteristics; pre-pandemic and current earnings, employment status, housing status, child support debt, ability to make child support payments; pre-pandemic and current father-child and co-parent relationship quality, time spent with children, time spent on childcare, frequency of conflict with co-parent, and level of (dis)agreement with co-parent regarding COVID-19 protocols. We designed the survey to reflect a 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. The survey took approximately 20–30 minutes to complete and participants received a \$25 electronic gift card.

Focus group discussions were conducted in person and online. We held three in-person focus groups, two coinciding with the Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit held at Milwaukee Area Technical College, and one hosted by Ascension Ebenezer Resource Center. We held three focus groups online via Zoom, one coinciding with the online component of the Milwaukee Fatherhood Summit, one supported by New Concept Self Development Center, and one initially planned as an in-person focus group discussion to be hosted by Gee's Clippers that moved online due to the Omicron wave of COVID-19. The same format was followed for in-person and online focus groups. Participants received informed consent information, completed a brief demographic survey (on paper or via Qualtrics; see Appendix A: Demographic Survey for Fathers and the COVID-19 Pandemic Focus Group Participants), and then participated in a 90-minute facilitated discussion that addressed experiences with child support during the pandemic,

changes in employment during the pandemic, co-parenting relationships during the pandemic, father-child relationships and involvement in childcare and children's schooling during the pandemic (see Appendix B: Focus Group Guide). Focus groups were facilitated by Dr. Tova Walsh and PhD student Michael Hoffmeister. Dr. Walsh has extensive experience conducting focus groups and Mr. Hoffmeister was trained and skillfully co-facilitated. Discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis. Participants received \$50 (in cash in the case of in-person focus groups, via electronic gift card in the case of online focus groups). All study procedures (inclusive of both survey and focus group components) were approved by the UW–Madison Education and Social / Behavioral Science Institutional Review Board.

### **Data Analysis**

The final survey and focus group samples offered a range of perspectives, and findings of this research proved to be rich and instructive. We used the survey data to explore pandemic-related difficulties among the population of vulnerable fathers who participate in programming of the MFI and collaborating organizations in Milwaukee. We used Stata statistical software to generate descriptive statistics to determine prevalence of a variety of pandemic-related difficulties. We used responses to retrospective questions included in this cross-sectional survey to examine which aspects of fathers' experience now are new or plausibly connected to the pandemic and related economic hardships and social conditions. In light of the smaller than expected survey sample size, we present bivariate results in lieu of models, but we also have richer and more extensive focus groups than anticipated. We conducted a thematic analysis to identify themes related to financial and parenting challenges and experiences with child support agencies and family courts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Focus group recordings were professionally transcribed and transcripts were content coded by two researchers independently.

In a first round of open coding, data was organized into smaller segments and descriptors attached to the segments. In an iterative process, the research team reviewed each transcript multiple times to distinguish and refine definition of recurrent themes and to establish reliable codes. When the research team reached consensus on code definitions, all transcripts were coded accordingly.

Below, we present significant findings from both the survey and focus group data.

## **SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS**

### **Survey**

Survey results illuminate pandemic-related difficulties among the population of vulnerable fathers who participate in programming of the MFI and collaborating organizations in Milwaukee. Survey participants were primarily Black (77%), about half had completed some college or less, 60% were currently in a romantic relationship, and a little over half reported having 1–2 children while 44% reported 3 or more children. (For further characteristics of the sample, see Table 1.) Participants reported a mix of stability and change in employment, income, child support orders, past-due child support, and access to child support agencies and family courts during the pandemic (see Table 2). About 22% of the sample reported being laid off or experiencing a decrease in work hours due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, not all fathers experienced these difficulties: about 54% of the sample reported no changes to employment and about 22% reported an increase in hours or starting new employment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 19–24% of respondents described reduced access to child support agencies and family courts for reasons attributable to the pandemic. A majority of participants reported no change in ability to pay child support, ability to pay rent, or healthcare coverage, but a significant proportion of participants did report heightened financial stressors of various kinds (see Table 3).

Participant ratings of father-child and co-parent relationship quality before and since the pandemic were relatively stable, but fathers noted significant increases in time spent with children and time spent on childcare and reported considerable disagreement with their child(ren)'s mother(s) over best practices related to COVID-19 and health (see Table 4).

**Table 2: Descriptive Analyses of Pandemic-Incurred Changes**

	Obs.	%
<b>Employment Changes</b>		
Employed before pandemic, no changes	37	47%
Unemployed before pandemic, no changes	6	8%
Still employed, <i>increased</i> hours	9	11%
Laid off or looking for work due to COVID-19	9	11%
New employment during COVID-19	9	11%
Still employed, <i>decreased</i> hours	6	8%
Something else	3	4%
<b>Income Changes</b>		
Personal income has not changed	31	39%
Personal income <i>decreased</i>	27	34%
Personal income <i>increased</i>	12	15%
Personal income has gone up <i>and</i> gone down	7	9%
Something else	2	3%
<b>Child Support Order Change (among those with nonresident children)</b>		
No change in child support order during COVID-19	15	23%
I owe less now	15	19%
I owe more now	1	1%
No child support order	5	57%
<b>Past-Due Child Support (among those with nonresident children)</b>		
Behind payments before COVID-19 and currently	21	31%
Not behind payments before COVID-19 <i>but currently behind</i>	2	3%
Not behind payments before COVID-19 and currently	13	67%
<b>Pandemic Impacts on Family Court and/or Child Support Office Access*</b>		
One or more access issues identified	31	39%
Access delayed due to pandemic	17	22%
Inquiries unanswered by family court or child support	19	24%
Access delayed due to change in office hours	18	23%
Unreliable internet; unable to access virtual appointments/e-mails	15	19%
Access delayed due to unavailable walk-in options	19	24%

\*Not mutually exclusive.

**Table 3: COVID-19 Financial Stressors**

	<b>Obs.</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Child Support (among those with nonresident children)</b>		
No impact	16	43%
Harder time paying	16	43%
Easier time paying	5	14%
<b>Ability to Pay Rent</b>		
Behind on rent before COVID and currently	13	16%
Behind on rent currently, but not before COVID	5	6%
Behind on rent before COVID, but not currently	6	8%
Not behind on rent before COVID or currently	52	66%
No response	3	4%
<b>Change in Healthcare Coverage</b>		
Lost eligibility or access to healthcare	8	10%
Gained eligibility or access to healthcare	4	5%
No change	66	84%
No response	1	1%
<b>Unemployment</b>		
Unemployed now, unemployed prior to COVID	13	16%
Unemployed now, employed prior to COVID	9	11%
No period of unemployment	57	72%

**Table 4: COVID-19 Relationship Stressors**

	Mean	SD	Obs.	%
<b>Relationship with Child<sup>a</sup></b>				
Closeness with child <i>before COVID</i>	5.54	1.81		
Closeness with child <i>currently</i>	5.84	1.80		
<b>Change in Relationship with Child</b>				
Parent and child have a closer relationship now			21	27%
No change in relationship			50	63%
Parent and child have a more distant relationship now			6	8%
No response			2	3%
<b>Time with Child</b>				
Less time			23	29%
No change			23	29%
More time			32	41%
No response			1	1%
<b>Change in Time Spent on Childcare</b>				
Longer or more time providing childcare			25	32%
Shorter or less time providing childcare			14	18%
About the same amount of time as before			37	47%
No response			3	4%
<b>Relationship with Co-Parent</b>				
Closeness with co-parent <i>before COVID</i>	4.73	2.08		
Closeness with co-parent <i>currently</i>	4.68	2.16		
<b>Change in Relationship with Co-Parent</b>				
Parents have a closer relationship now			10	13%
No change in relationship			56	71%
Parents have a more distant relationship now			8	10%
No response			5	6%
<b>Conflict with Co-Parent<sup>b</sup></b>				
Conflict with co-parent <i>before COVID</i>	2.64	1.28		
Conflict with co-parent <i>currently</i>	2.62	1.32		
<b>Change in Conflict with Co-Parent</b>				
Parents experience more conflict now			7	9%
No change in conflict			56	71%
Parent experience less conflict now			8	10%
No response			8	10%
<b>Agreement with Co-Parent Regarding Best Practices for COVID-19 and Health</b>				
Never			16	20%
Rarely			11	14%
Sometimes			17	22%
Very often			19	24%
Extremely often			12	15%
No response			4	5%

<sup>a</sup>“Relationship with Child” and “Relationship with Co-Parent” were measured on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1=extremely distant and 7=extremely close.

<sup>b</sup>Conflict with co-parent was measured as a frequency of conflict, with 1=never and 5=extremely often.

In addition, survey results suggest some important relationships between fathers' characteristics and outcomes of interest, specifically changes in time spent with children during the pandemic and changes in income during the pandemic. Table 5 shows associations between the father's relationship status and change in time spent with children during the pandemic, and the age of father's youngest child and change in time spent with children during the pandemic. Over half of single fathers (n=14, 53.8%) reported having less time with their child during the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas 45.8% (n=22) of fathers in a relationship report having more time with their child. Further, 64.5% (n=20) of fathers whose youngest child was between 0–5 years old report having more time with their child. This is of note compared to fathers whose youngest child was between 6–12 years old or older than 13, who were more evenly distributed in time change categories.

**Table 5. Change in Time Spent with Child During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Time with Child	Relationship Status		Age of Youngest Child		
	In a Relationship	Single	0–5 years old	6–12 years old	13+ years old
Less Time	8	14	5	9	9
No Change	18	5	6	10	7
More Time	22	7	20	8	4

**Note:** All fathers who did not respond to either questions that assessed their time spent with their child, and those who did not provide relationship status or the age of their youngest child, were removed from this sample.

Table 6 provides bivariate results for reported changes in income due to the COVID-19 pandemic. More fathers with higher educational attainment reported experiencing no change in income. Well over half of fathers with a 4-year degree or higher (n=21, 58.3%) reported no change in income while 42.5% (n=17) of fathers without a completed college degree reported decreases in income due to COVID-19. Changes in income also impacted fathers' ability to pay child support. While most fathers (n=51, 67.1%) report that the pandemic had no impact on their



ability to pay child support, 44.4% (n=12) of fathers with decreased incomes did report difficulty paying child support due to COVID-19.

**Table 6. Change in Income During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

<b>Income During Pandemic</b>	<b>Educational Attainment</b>		<b>Income Change Impact on Child Support</b>		
	Some college or less	4-year degree or more	Harder to Pay	No Impact	Easier to Pay
Decreased	17	8	12	14	1
Increased	8	4	0	7	2
No Change	9	21	5	23	3
Both Increased and Decreased	4	3	1	6	0
Something Else	2	0	1	1	0

**Note:** All fathers who did not respond to the question that assessed their income during the pandemic, and those who did not provide information regarding educational attainment or impact on child support, were removed from this sample.

## Focus Groups

Findings from the six focus groups shed light on the experiences of vulnerable fathers in Milwaukee during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our analysis emphasized identifying and learning about aspects of fathers’ experiences with finances and employment, parenting and co-parenting, and engagement with child support agencies and family courts that were impacted by the pandemic, including both new or heightened challenges and positive changes. We particularly sought to deepen insight into fathers’ experiences emerging from the survey results by exploring the context for those experiences.

Below we present themes in four categories: pandemic devastation, encompassing the personal and community losses experienced by participants throughout the period of the pandemic; pandemic impacts on finances and employment; pandemic impacts on parenting and co-parenting; and experiences with child support payments, child support agencies, and family courts during the pandemic. Themes in each category are described with representative quotations presented to illustrate the themes. Identifying details have been removed to protect participant confidentiality.

To fully convey the salience and meaning of the results presented below, it is necessary that we first describe how the experiences and perspectives related below were communicated. Fathers were enthusiastic in their response to the focus group component of the study, noting that the experiences and needs of low-income and noncustodial fathers are too often overlooked and showing eagerness to join other fathers in conversation. At times, the discussion became heated and fathers were quick to clarify that their intensity reflects how deeply they care about their kids. One father said,

*I know it might sound like I'm attitude-ed or whatever, because I'm loud, I'm passionate, about [my kids]... This is a problem for a lot of Black fathers man, I ain't gone just say Black, I'm gonna just say fathers because they [courts, custodial parents] make it so hard for you to be a part of your kid's life that most of them just quit.*

Participants noted that there are few opportunities for fathers to come together and expressed appreciation for the opportunity to be in conversation with one another. As one father said:

*I appreciate y'all... I said a lot... you know I didn't mean to, but honestly like sometimes we don't have this platform to even talk... I don't, I don't talk to nobody... This is what we need; you need brothers to talk and listen.*

During the discussions, fathers often eagerly agreed with perspectives shared by others and spoke of how meaningful it was to connect with others who can relate to their experiences. As one father stated, “I cannot believe this man just described my life, and I don’t even know this man.”

### ***Pandemic devastation***

Fathers’ experiences of specific pandemic impacts on finances and employment, parenting and co-parenting, child support payments and engagement with child support agencies and family courts occurred amidst broader impacts of the pandemic. In national comparison studies, no other metro area ranks as consistently poorly as Milwaukee on indicators of Black

community well-being and segregation (Levine, 2020). This foundation of concentrated disadvantage has been further stressed by the pandemic; Black communities in Milwaukee were the hardest hit by the virus (van Dorn, Cooney, & Sabin, 2020). While the survey component of the study assessed individual and immediate family experiences of pandemic-related challenges, focus group participants situated individual and family experiences in the context of their communities and the devastating impact of COVID-19 on their communities. Most participants described devastating losses resulting from the pandemic, with some referencing the deaths of family or community members from COVID, some relating hardships faced by their loved ones during the pandemic, and some describing the toll of the pandemic on their own and others' mental health and well-being.

#### *Grieving and supporting those most affected by COVID deaths*

Fathers described extensive losses, including the deaths of family, friends, coworkers, and community members throughout the period of the pandemic. These losses were integral to their accounts of their experiences since March 2020. As one father detailed,

*My grandmother never left home [during the pandemic], her great grandkids gave it [COVID] to her. I lost my best friend at 35 years, he's gone, he was gone in a week. Grandma lived a month. One of my uncles, he lived a month, my other uncle lived a week.*

These losses and resultant grief shape the lives of the fathers who participated in the study. In some cases, the losses had immediate implications for fathers' finances and caregiving capacity. Fathers described helping to care for extended family and community members, particularly children and the elderly, in the wake of losses that deprived these individuals of people who had been central to their care.

### *Mental health implications of the pandemic*

Fathers who participated in this study experienced a multitude of stresses during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the deaths of loved ones from COVID-19, worry about personal and family health and safety, financial pressures and economic uncertainty, and isolation due to social distancing. Amid these many stressors, participants describe the toll of gendered expectations that men and fathers should be stoic and handle their problems themselves. As one father described,

*It's been hard because... you keep everything internally. Being a father and a man you have to keep the peace and be strong on the outside, but on the inside, you know you're falling apart.*

Another father shared his experience of the same pressure to be strong and hide his vulnerability:

*That's one of the things that we constantly are battling each and every day that a lot of people don't talk about... it's like, oh well we've got to suppress our feelings or suppress our thoughts.*

Fathers described difficulty coping with the many challenges of the pandemic, new or heightened awareness of the importance of mental health, and concern about the long-term effects of the trauma they will carry from their experiences during the pandemic. While discussing their personal mental health, fathers explicitly connected their own experience to that of other low-income fathers, noncustodial fathers, Black fathers, or members of their community, recognizing the mental health implications of the pandemic for others in similar circumstances.

*Mental health is real and during this season of COVID... it has been put to the test. ...*

*I'm sure that's going to have a lot of long-term effects, you know, internally for us... When you suppress trauma, you know, it comes out in different ways.*

### *Pandemic impacts on finances and employment*

Participants' experiences related to finances and employment during the pandemic were strikingly varied. Here we illustrate that variation, describe the consistent finding that the pandemic incurred heightened financial stress for fathers regardless of financial stability, and relate the adjustments fathers made in their work lives in response to school and daycare closures.

### *Mixed accounts of pandemic effects on financial and job security*

Consistent with survey results, focus group participants' accounts of the effects of the pandemic on their financial stability were mixed. Among the survey sample, fathers with less education were more likely to experience reduction in income due to COVID-19. Among focus group participants, fathers employed in working-class occupations (e.g., factory workers, retail) described significant financial impacts of the pandemic, including increased job and income insecurity. Conversely, fathers with more professional jobs (e.g., healthcare professional, nonprofit staff) described limited financial impacts.

Some fathers described losing employment early in the pandemic when emergency orders required businesses to close, and regaining employment when businesses reopened. As one father reported, "I lost a pretty good job when this first started... It was tough for a while... Now I'm back [to work]." Other fathers reported that they and/or their partners experienced a decrease in hours and income during the pandemic. As one father said, "my hours got cut. I went from 90 hours ... to 20, 25 hours a pay period." Among fathers who experienced reduced income due to the pandemic, changes in income had significant consequences, including lost modes of transportation and housing.

Among fathers who did not lose work or income due to the pandemic, some in fact reported that they were able to work additional hours and earn more income during the pandemic. A few participants said that the pandemic inspired them to seek new opportunities or to use technology creatively to increase business and outreach to new customers.

*Heightened financial stress and assisting loved ones experiencing significant hardship*

Even among fathers who maintained employment and income or experienced gains, the pandemic heightened stress and fear of financial precarity. Several participants worked temp jobs and worried, “Is there still going to be jobs... because a lot of things were shut down.” Seeing family members and friends lose jobs prompted some fathers to feel more vulnerable. As one father said, “[it made me] worry about making money to provide for mine... You’ve got to think about your livelihood and your survival.”

Some fathers described new responsibilities to financially assist loved ones who were financially devastated by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic fallout. As one father explained,

*My mother got affected by the pandemic as well where she lost just about everything... Even though she lost her job, I still had mine and when she got to the point where she lost everything, I made sure she had a place to stay and everything, like I paid the rent, security deposit, ... Me still being able to work and she couldn't, I made sure she still had everything [that she needed].*

While survey results demonstrate a mix of stability and change in employment and income, these results likely do not fully capture the financial impact of the pandemic for low-income and noncustodial fathers as fathers with stable employment and income may face new financial pressures to support family members in the wake of COVID impacts.

### *Adjusting work life to school and daycare closures*

At the intersection of pandemic impacts on employment and finances and pandemic impacts on parenting and co-parenting, some fathers reported both need and desire to change their work schedule or reduce work hours to care for children during school and daycare closures. Many fathers who participated in the focus groups had children from both a previous and current relationship, and fathers living with a current romantic partner described arranging work schedules to offset one another in order to have an adult home with children during school and daycare closures. Single fathers had less flexibility and described difficulty figuring out how to maintain employment and participate in caring for their children during closures. These fathers worried about how they could shoulder household bills and child support payments if they worked less, and at the same time felt responsible to be involved in their child's virtual learning and support their co-parent by doing their share. As one father described, "you've got to be the provider, provider, provider, provider, provider, but you really need to be a presence, a presence, a presence."

Balancing the need to be both "the provider" and "a presence" was particularly difficult for fathers with young children. These fathers identified unpredictable childcare schedules as adding to the financial challenges they faced during the pandemic. After the initial closure of schools and daycares, fathers of young children reported frequently having to give up paid work time when their children's childcare centers or schools sporadically closed due to COVID-19 outbreaks. As one father described, "You send your kids to daycare and then they have a COVID outbreak so now you have to stay home with them and, you know dealing with that back and forth [makes it hard to work]."

### ***Pandemic impacts on parenting and co-parenting***

Similar to employment and finances, focus group participants' parenting and co-parenting experiences during the pandemic were strikingly varied, with some noncustodial fathers reporting increased time and closeness with children and strengthened co-parenting during the pandemic, and others reporting reduced contact with children and increased conflict with custodial parents. These findings, as described below, add important nuance to the trends revealed by the survey.

#### *Changes in time and relationships with children due to the pandemic*

Survey results demonstrate an overall trend of significant increases in fathers' time spent with children and time spent on childcare, and suggest that fathers who are currently partnered (as compared to those who are single) and fathers who have a child under 6 years of age (as compared to those whose children are all 6 years of age or older) were more likely to spend increased time with their children since the start of the pandemic. Findings of the focus groups help to explain and contextualize these results.

Some fathers reported that stay at home orders, virtual schooling for children, and/or work from home arrangements allowed them to spend significantly more time with their children than they had been able to pre-pandemic. This was more often the case for fathers who had children whom they shared with a current romantic partner and with whom they share a household, and for fathers in professional jobs that allowed for a transition to work from home. These fathers described added time together due to the pandemic as an opportunity to form closer relationships with their children. They described feelings of gratitude and joy resulting from being able to spend quality time with and get to know their children better. As one father stated:



*[Before the pandemic] with me working third shift and getting in you know in the morning when the kids was taking off, it was just like I'm missing them, you know what I mean... But um, fast forward, fast forward [and now] I'm able to, you know, interact a lot more. I'm there, you know what I mean, and it feels different too, you know what I mean, it feels good because I don't miss anything.*

Fathers credited increased time together during the pandemic for allowing them to get to know their children's interests and talents in a way they had not previously been able to do and providing the opportunity for them to introduce their children to new activities, hobbies, and experiences. They also recognized greater engagement and involvement in their children's learning as an opportunity presented by the pandemic. As one father explained:

*[COVID] allowed me to get to really know my kids and really engage and do schoolwork, and always encourage them... I had the luxury or the blessing to be able to work from home, and I could be on a meeting and I could be like, 'hold on y'all I got to figure out algebra.'*

Alongside these benefits of increased time together, fathers also acknowledged challenges, including boredom resulting from extended time at home due to quarantines and stress associated with assisting children during virtual learning. As one father said, “[there were] ups and downs, issues with my kids not wanting to do they work. With the virtual thing it was very stressful.”

While some fathers experienced increased time with children, other fathers reported that they were able to see their children less due to the pandemic, and in some cases fathers who shared children with more than one co-parent described different changes in time spent with their children based on whether or not they lived with the child and how well they get along with the child's mother. As one father described:

*[We] have children who don't live in the home with us and some of us have moved on and had other children who are, who are fortunate enough to grow in the same home as us, you know. We still love them all the same [but don't see them the same]... Now COVID is here, it's hurting us... It put a strain on the relationship I had with my oldest sons [because I see them less].*

Most noncustodial fathers reported that quarantines due to COVID-19 exposures and isolation due to infection had at times prevented them from being able to take their children for scheduled visits. Some fathers reported frustration that custodial parents regularly cited concern that the children would be at risk of infection while visiting the noncustodial parent as a reason to cancel planned visits. Among fathers who described longstanding challenging relationships with their children's mother, some fathers perceived that issues related to the pandemic were being (mis)used by their children's mother as a pretense to not adhere to established visitation schedules. One father asserted, "she lied and said my daughter had COVID on the Wednesdays that I get her so that I couldn't even get my child."

Several fathers that did not have primary custody of their children reported being unable to see their children anymore due to the custodial parent's decision to move with the children during the pandemic. The moves were described as a response to job loss and other harms incurred by the pandemic. For example, one father described:

*Before COVID I had more access... like I could pick them up from school, I can take them to school... And the number one reason for them leaving [during the pandemic] was like I said, you know, losing her job they didn't have a place to stay, so it was like well we gonna go wherever we can live at... That decision impacted my access to my kids, the co-parenting kind of almost disappeared...*

Relocation of children with their custodial parent resulted in some fathers having no face-to-face contact with their children for an extended period, and in some cases, limited digital communication. As one father who had a high conflict relationship with his children's mother prior to the pandemic described, "I mean she moved and she don't even let me talk to him right now because she (is) bitter. I'm like you affecting... this is about the kid, you affecting him."

In a few instances, noncustodial fathers of adolescent children described making the difficult decision to not allow their older children to come to their homes based on their

assessment that their child's behavior and/or the behavior of the custodial parent and other household members carried high risk for COVID-19 infection and transmission. In these cases, fathers described feeling torn between their desire to see their older children and their need to protect their younger children with whom they share a home. As one father described,

*They out living their life, [not being cautious about COVID], ... [and] I wouldn't let my [older] sons in my house. Not because I didn't love them. ... [Because] I'm like dude like I know you ain't being careful, you could get your little brother sick...*

Fathers who reported decreased time with their children due to the pandemic described feelings of guilt and distress at not being able to support their children through pandemic challenges in-person. In particular, several fathers spoke of how difficult it was for them and their children when children became infected with COVID-19 and fathers could not be there to comfort them. As one father said, "it's so hard ... [to know they are] in pain and not be able to really comfort or ... console." Fathers who lost time with their children during the pandemic described a need to repair those relationships. As one father explained, "seeing my kids [during the pandemic] was like none and void. The relationship fell apart and, you know just been starting to work on building that back with them. It's hard."

#### *Co-parenting during the pandemic: gains and setbacks*

Survey results demonstrated considerable disagreement between fathers and their child(ren)'s mother(s) over best practices related to COVID-19 and health, and this finding was echoed in the focus groups. As one father elaborated:

*As a co-parent of my oldest son... it was kind of a struggle a little bit to get him, well to get his mom, to see ... [the reality]. She was very, like, well he can go anywhere, he can do whatever. And I'm like no, he can't, like you've got to, you've got to understand that... this is very serious. Finally convincing her to understand about the vaccination and getting him to finally get vaccinated, that, that was a challenge... And really getting them to understand that you just can't*

*go around being unmasked and even though... you've been vaccinated, you still have to wear a mask... Now she sees that... [All the] friends that we have lost during the pandemic, the eyes have widened and I think she really understands the importance of this pandemic and now she's really being more cautionary.*

Many fathers reported that disagreements over COVID-19 protocols, such as masking, social distancing, and vaccinations, led to increased strain in their co-parenting relationships. As one father stated “[When I say] hey you got to be careful ... [her response is] you don't run my house.” This at times affected the frequency with which fathers were able to see and communicate with their children and led to feelings of distress. One father expressed his concern over the effect that these disagreements were having on his children when he said, “The kids be stuck right in the middle. You think kids don't be affected by mom and dad going back and forth?”

There were also reports of positive changes to co-parenting relationships. Some fathers reported that necessary conversations about COVID-19 protocols allowed them and their co-parent to improve their communication. Several fathers stated that their co-parent's ability to communicate clearly about COVID-19 exposures and/or infections was very helpful at managing stress and worry about infection. This is illustrated in the statement of one focus group participant that:

*I mean to be honest, some of the, uh, the best times that we've had, in terms of working together with him, ... [have been] during this pandemic. And so if anything happens at her house, um, she's been pretty good at communicating that, and he's just stayed here. Um, and vice versa.*

Participants reported that both parents prioritizing their children's safety during the pandemic allowed them to move past personal disputes with one another. As one father noted regarding his co-parent and ex-partner, “When it came to me and my kid's mother, I mean yeah, we had problems or whatever, but when it came to the pandemic and everything, personal things

that we had or whatever, it didn't matter anymore." Similarly, some fathers described a mutual commitment to supporting their children with virtual learning as prompting greater collaboration:

*When it started, we made sure we took them out of daycare and we just took turns; she got to work, I even changed my job because of it so I can make sure she can go to work and do what she gotta do. I can go to work, and one of us can always be there to watch the kids.*

Some fathers also reported an increase in empathy and emotional support for their co-parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was primarily noted by fathers who lived with a romantic partner and their children, and sometimes prompted fathers to feel greater empathy and offer increased support to a former partner with whom they shared custody of a child. Fathers said that working from and staying at home had helped them to see the number of responsibilities and level of stress that parents manage when at home with children and motivated them to do more. One father described new tasks he had taken on during the pandemic this way: "fix food, um sort clothes, I get clothes ready for school the next morning, I do everything, I don't care what it is. I sweep, I clean, I wash dishes." Fathers recognized that all parents, including themselves and the mothers of their children, have experienced heightened stress during the pandemic and expressed the desire to be there for all of their co-parents. One father stated, "I'm like... you need anything or want to talk about anything that's what I'm here for, you know." One father reported being inspired to enter counseling during the pandemic to improve communication and relationship skills.

### ***Experiences with child support payments, child support agencies, and family courts during the pandemic***

Most focus group participants reported little change in their experiences paying child support and their perception of child support services due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of participants did not have or perceive a need for any engagement with child support

agencies or family courts during the pandemic, but among those who did, fathers described reduced access.

These findings, which amplify survey results, are further developed below.

### *Child support payments and debt*

A majority of survey respondents reported no change in their ability to pay child support, and this was largely true of focus group participants. Some fathers described difficulty paying the amount of their order both before and since the pandemic. As one father said, “It’s hard to survive with what they take.”

Fathers who lost employment, hours, and/or income during the pandemic described increased difficulty paying child support until they found new employment or hours picked back up. These fathers expressed frustration that their unemployment and stimulus checks were garnished due to child support debt, increasing their financial precarity.

Many participants explained that they owed large amounts in child support debt prior to the pandemic, and any increase in amount owed during the pandemic felt insignificant given that they already owed amounts they could not imagine ever being able to pay. As one father explained, “I gave the prison system 17 and a half years... My back pay [child support that I owe is] probably about 400 and some thousand... I never in this lifetime can’t touch it. Not in another lifetime, can’t catch [up to] that.” Across multiple focus groups, multiple fathers joked that “the only way out” of unmanageable child support debt is winning the lottery or death.

### *Experiences with child support agencies*

Few fathers who participated in the focus groups had attempted to access child support agencies during the pandemic. Among those who had, there was uncertainty about how to do so. Fathers said that they knew that offices were closed early in the pandemic and were not sure

when they reopened. Several fathers described difficulties with contacting staff at child support agencies, expressing significant frustration. As one father said, “every time that I... call child support, you get put on hold. You be on hold for hours and hours and hours. I have literally sat in my truck for at least three hours waiting for somebody to come to the line and, all of a sudden, click, hang up.” Other fathers immediately suggested that the hang ups are intentional, with one father saying, “that’s because they don’t wanna hear our stories... They rather just hang up.” On the whole, focus group participants concurred that child support personnel do not treat fathers with respect. Several fathers asserted, and many others indicated their agreement, that they believe child support programs and services were set up to assist mothers and that there are not programs or services available to assist fathers. Fathers expressed a desire for programs aimed at addressing difficulties with child support payments due to the pandemic and said they don’t know whether any such programs exist or how to find out about them. As one father stated, “They don’t really like reach out and inform us; hey we have a program for child support, for if the pandemic has affected you. I wouldn’t know.”

### *Experiences with family courts*

Most participants had not needed to access family courts during the pandemic, but a few reported needing to initiate and attend hearings when co-parents were not adhering to agreed-upon visitation schedules. They described uncertainty about if and when the courts would be available to them. As one father explained, “It was closed for a long time... [and then] everything was virtual... As far as I know, I didn’t know if you can go down there and even, you know, if they’re caught up enough to even give a new court date.” Fathers who did need to access family court since the pandemic began perceived that their cases were delayed significantly by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some fathers felt their situation warranted court

intervention, (e.g., believed their order should be modified), but chose not to seek a hearing because they felt hopeless based on prior experience: “It’s not worth the time... It’s set up for the dad to lose...”

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH**

Findings of this study provide insight into the experiences of low-income and noncustodial fathers in Milwaukee during the pandemic, demonstrating that a significant proportion of fathers experienced relative stability in income and employment during the pandemic, some fathers experienced both heightened financial and relationship stressors, and a subset of fathers reported improved father-child and interparental relationships. In combination, survey and focus group results reveal trends and illuminate fathers’ lived experiences, including demonstrating increased barriers to accessing child support agencies and family courts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings suggest the need for support to fathers to maintain desired changes incurred by the pandemic, such as increased opportunities for involvement with children and improved communication with custodial parents, as well as support to fathers to restore damaged relationships and recover from pandemic-incurred or exacerbated financial stressors.

This study relied on cross-sectional survey and focus group data collected from a sample of fathers recruited in collaboration with MFI and other father-serving organizations. It’s possible that fathers who had experienced notable stressors during the pandemic were more likely to enroll in the study, and it’s also possible that our recruitment strategy did not reach fathers who are least connected to services and supports and may not capture the experiences of those who faced the most severe pandemic-related difficulties. It is not possible, based on this study’s sample, to generalize to the larger population of Wisconsin fathers with child support orders. However, the current study makes an important contribution by expanding understanding



of the experiences of primarily Black, low-income, and noncustodial fathers in a city characterized by profound racial disparities and among communities disproportionately harmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This study provides a foundation for continued investigation of the pandemic experiences of Wisconsin fathers and families and suggests opportunities to strengthen the recognition and responsiveness of Wisconsin courts and child support agencies to changes in fathers' parenting engagement and financial circumstances over the last two years.

### **Policy and Practice Implications**

Following are a set of ideas for how Wisconsin child support agencies can better meet the needs of low-income and noncustodial fathers at this stage of the pandemic, informed by the reported experiences and perspectives of fathers who participated in this research.

1. Recognize the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic on low-income and noncustodial fathers and honor the ways these fathers, as all parents during the pandemic, have reorganized their lives to balance the dual responsibilities of parenting through school and daycare closures and maintaining employment in order to financially provide for children. Recognize that adjustments made by noncustodial fathers to increase availability for caregiving influence the ability of custodial mothers to maintain their career trajectories. Consider temporary order changes for temporary changes in circumstances, as when noncustodial parents substantially reduced work hours to be available to children during periods of school and daycare closure, child illness, or required quarantine.
2. Provide (or increase) training for child support professionals on the range of pandemic-incurred changes to fathers' parenting engagement and financial circumstances, in particular emphasizing that some fathers have experienced desired changes that they wish to maintain and others have experienced setbacks that they wish to remediate.
3. Recognize differential impacts of the pandemic on particular group of fathers, and need for policies and services that are responsive to these distinctions. Single fathers were most likely to report losing time with and connection to their children due to COVID and expressed strong desire for support to regain time with children and rebuild relationships. Fathers with higher levels of education had greater employment stability during the pandemic, enabling them to continue to pay child support with regularity. Support for fathers with lower levels of education to further their education may reduce ups and downs in employment, earnings, and ability to pay child support in the future. Because a large majority of participants in this research were non-Hispanic Black, we could not examine variation in pandemic experiences by race / ethnicity, however, there is

substantial evidence that Black and Latino communities nationally, across Wisconsin, and in Milwaukee have been disproportionately harmed by the pandemic, suggesting the need for increased investment in supports for Black and Latino fathers and families.

4. Identify outreach strategies to (re-)engage fathers who experienced difficulties and delays in their efforts to access child support services during the pandemic, recognizing that some fathers are feeling alienated as a result of encountering barriers to access during the pandemic and may require guidance and reassurance to renew service engagement.
5. Establish or deepen connections between local child support agencies and community organizations serving fathers to help connect fathers to resources that can increase engagement between fathers and their children, increase fathers' well-being, and increase access to employment opportunities and ability to pay child support. In addition to the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative, which was the primary partner on this research, multiple community organizations in Milwaukee (including New Concept Self Development Center, Ascension Ebenezer Resource Center, Fathers Making Progress, the DAD Project, My Father's House) were enthusiastic in their support for the study and are eager to partner with agencies with shared commitments to strengthening fathers and families.

### **Research Implications**

Although the present study highlights the challenges faced by primarily Black, low-income, and noncustodial fathers in Milwaukee during the pandemic, there remains a need for future research to consider the experiences and intervention needs of a broader cross-section of fathers across Wisconsin, incorporating experiences across a wider range of Wisconsin counties, courts, and child support agencies, as well as across demographic groups. Experiences reported in this sample suggest the importance of understanding fathers' experiences, community contexts and how they may vary. These findings also suggest a need for careful consideration of both gains and setbacks experienced by fathers during the pandemic. In this sample, 40% of fathers reported more time spent with children and 31% reported more time spent on childcare due to the pandemic; learning about changes in time spent with children and time spent on childcare among noncustodial fathers across the state, as well as noncustodial and custodial parents' desires to continue these trajectories, can inform efforts to sustain mutually beneficial adjustments

prompted by the pandemic. Similarly, learning about setbacks in relationships as well as finances among fathers across the state can inform efforts to remediate losses.

Participants in this study reported high levels of disagreement about COVID-related health and safety practices. Some participants described “rising to the challenge” of the COVID crisis and improving communication with co-parents during the pandemic, while others described heightened conflict. Future research could investigate how noncustodial fathers and custodial mothers who experienced improved communication and reduced conflict during the pandemic achieved this result, how these achievements can be maintained for these families, and how noncustodial and custodial parents who experienced deterioration in their relationships during the pandemic can be supported to restore and strengthen their relationships.

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## Appendix A: Demographic Survey for Fathers and the COVID-19 Pandemic Focus Group Participants

These questions are about your background. We are asking these questions to better understand how personal characteristics may be related to pandemic fathering experiences. All responses to this survey are completely confidential.

### Demographics

1. How old are you?
  
2. Are you Hispanic or Latino?       Yes     No
  
3. What category best describes your race? *Please check all that apply:*
  - American Indian or Alaska Native
  - Asian
  - Black or African American
  - Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
  - White
  - Other
  
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
  - Some high school
  - GED
  - High school diploma
  - Some college
  - Technical certificate
  - Associate degree
  - Bachelor's Degree
  - Some graduate or professional school
  - Completed a graduate or professional degree
  
5. Which best describes your work situation? Select all that apply.
  - Unemployed and searching for work
  - Unemployed and not searching for work
  - Homemaker
  - Student

- Part-time employment Describe: \_\_\_\_\_
- Full-time employment Describe: \_\_\_\_\_

6. What is your household income per year?

- Less than \$24,999
- \$25,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 to \$124,999
- \$125,000 to \$149,999
- \$150,000 or more

7. What is your current marital status?

- Married
- In a registered domestic partnership or civil union
- Engaged
- Divorced
- Separated
- Widowed
- Single
- Other

8. Who lives in your household? Please list the relationship to you, age and gender of the people living at least part-time in the household.

Relationship to you	Age	Gender

9. Do you have any children who do not live with you full-time?  Yes  No  
*If yes, please choose all that apply:*

- I have one or more children who live part-time in another household.

- I have one or more children who live full-time in another household.
- I have one or more children in college.
- I have one or more children who are grown and living on their own.

10. Do you have any additional children who are not listed in your response to Question 8?

- Yes     No

*If yes, please list the age(s) and gender(s) of any additional children below.*

Age	Gender

11. Are you a single parent?             Yes     No

12. Do you have a special needs child?     Yes     No

**Health and Wellbeing:**

13. Do you have health insurance?     No     Yes

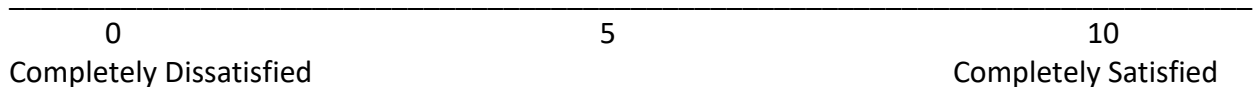
*If yes: Which provider?*

- Medicaid
- Other public
- Private

14. In general, would you say that your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

15. In general, would you say that your mental health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?

16. Thinking about your life and personal circumstances, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole?



## Appendix B: Focus Group Guide

Welcome, and thank you all for attending our discussion today. [Brief self-introduction of moderators, intro of notetaker]. The goal of our meeting is to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted you as a father, including how much time you were able to spend with your children and what that time was like, your relationships with your children's mothers or other caregivers, your experiences with child support, and your work situation. We are hoping to use this information to learn how fathers can be better supported during this time and at other stressful times.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions we will ask- you are the experts on your own lives and experiences. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said, and please listen respectfully if someone shares a perspective that you do not agree with. All of your responses today will remain confidential in that the moderators will never identify you. It is our responsibility as a group to protect one another's privacy. Please do not repeat anything that is said during our session outside of today's meeting.

As is described on the consent form you received, our session today will be audio-recorded and we have a notetaker present. Once the audio recording is transcribed, the audio file will be destroyed and all identifying details will be omitted from the transcript, including your names.

*Does anyone have any questions before we get our conversation started?*

1. Fathers and families have experienced so many changes and disruptions over the last year and a half during the COVID-19 pandemic. When you think back on the last year and a half, what's something that makes you feel proud of your child or children?
2. How has the time you spent with your child or children changed since March 2020?
  - 2.1. Amount of time
  - 2.2. Access to children
  - 2.3. Activities
  - 2.4. Closeness

### CO-PARENTING RELATIONSHIPS

*Next I would like to ask about how you have navigated your relationships with your children's mothers or other caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

3. In what ways did your relationships change during the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. In what ways did your relationships stay the same during the COVID-19 pandemic?
5. How did you communicate about risk assessment and tolerance during the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - 5.1. In what ways did you agree or disagree about risk assessment and tolerance?



6. If you experienced strain in your relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic, how did this affect your access to or relationship(s) with your child or children?
7. In what ways did your relationships make you feel more or less safe during the COVID-19 pandemic?

## **CHILD SUPPORT**

*I would now like to ask about your experiences with child support, child support agencies, and/or family courts during the pandemic.*

8. If you have needed access to child support offices or family courts during the COVID-19 pandemic, what was your experience like?
  - 8.1. Did you have to start or change a child support order? What was that like?
  - 8.2. How did your experience differ from what it was or would have been in pre-pandemic times?
  - 8.3. How did you communicate with or receive communication from these offices? How responsive did you find the offices to be to your needs?
  - 8.4. How did other stressors in your life affect your ability to work with child support offices or court systems?
9. What has made it easier to navigate the child support system during the pandemic? What has made it harder?
  - 9.1. How has this looked different during the pandemic than it did before?
10. What has made it easier to stay on top of your child support payments during the pandemic? What has made it harder?
  - 10.1. How has this looked different during the pandemic than it did before?
11. How do you support your children or your children's other caregivers outside of formal child support payments?
  - 11.1. How has this looked different during the pandemic than it did before?

*Now I would like to ask about how child support affects you and other areas of your life.*

12. What adjustments have you had to make in other areas of your life in order to meet child support obligations?
  - 12.1. How does child support affect the decisions you make about things like jobs, where you live, relationships.
  - 12.2. How has this been different during the pandemic than it was before?
13. How do you and your children's mothers or other caregivers communicate about child support or other child needs?
  - 13.1. How has the pandemic impacted your communication?

## **CHANGES IN EMPLOYMENT**

*Next I would like to ask about how changes in work due to the COVID-19 pandemic have affected your life as a parent.*

14. What changes in employment did you experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - 14.1. Can you tell us about the circumstances surrounding your changes in employment. [How did personal decision-making influence your changes in employment, or how were changes out of your control?]
  - 14.2. In what ways did safety concerns, childcare obligations, or other concerns affect your employment?
  - 14.3. In what ways did layoffs or government-mandated safety protocols affect your employment?
15. In what ways did your changes in employment affect the time you were able to spend with your children?
16. In what ways did your changes in employment affect your personal financial stability?
17. In what ways did your changes in employment affect your child support agreements?
18. Have you had concerns regarding employment during the COVID-19 pandemic? Please tell us about that.

## **SCHOOL SUPPORT**

*Next I would like to ask about your involvement with supporting your school aged child or children with virtual or other learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.*

19. How did COVID-19 affect your child's or children's experiences with school over the last 18 months?
20. How happy were you with your involvement in your child's or children's schooling during the pandemic?
21. How did pandemic schooling impact your relationship with your child or children?
22. What was the biggest challenge you faced in supporting your child or children with school during the COVID-19 pandemic?
23. What was the greatest success you had in supporting your child or children with school during the COVID-19 pandemic?

*Lastly, I would like to ask about something positive you have taken away from your experiences of fathering during a pandemic.*

24. When you think about your past 18 months as a father, what do you reflect on that makes you feel proud?

That concludes our focus group. Thank you so much for taking the time to come and share your thoughts and experiences with us.

# Fathers and the COVID-19 Pandemic

University of Wisconsin researchers are conducting a study to learn about ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the lives of fathers and their families.

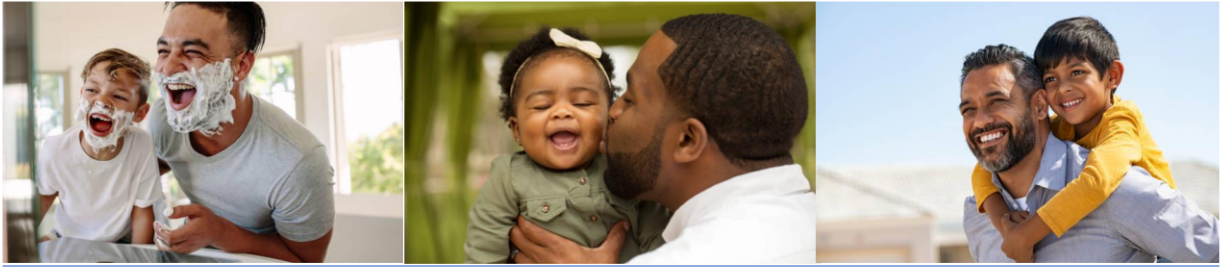


If you are a father to one or more children under age 18 or currently expecting a baby, you have participated or plan to participate in programming of the Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative or other services specifically for fathers in Milwaukee, you are 18 years of age or older and live in Milwaukee County, you are eligible to participate in this study. Participation will include completing an online survey that will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Each participant will receive a \$25 gift card as a thank you for your time.

*To learn more about this study, please contact Dr. Tova Walsh by phone at 608-265-7806 or by email at [tbwalsh@wisc.edu](mailto:tbwalsh@wisc.edu)*

*To participate in the study, please reach out to the study team at [MilwaukeeFathersCovidStudy@mailplus.wish.edu](mailto:MilwaukeeFathersCovidStudy@mailplus.wish.edu) or (608) 218-4771 to confirm eligibility.*

*Please share this announcement with others you know who may be eligible and interested to participate!*



## Fathers and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Join a focus group & help us learn how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the lives of fathers & their families

**ARE YOU** A father expecting a baby or have 1+ children under 18?  
**ARE YOU** 18 or older?  
**DO YOU** Live in Milwaukee County?

*you are eligible to participate in this virtual focus group.*

<https://uwmadison.zoom.us/j/95392639091>

Tuesday, December 21, 2021 5:30 - 7:00 pm or  
Wednesday, December 22, 2021 5:30 - 7:00 pm

You will **receive a \$50 gift card for your time**  
*Fathers are welcome to participate in either (but not both) of the focus groups.*

Click below or scan QR code to sign up!

[https://uwmadison.zoom.us/j/95392639091](#)



If you have any questions, please contact the study team at  
[MilwaukeeFathersCovidStudy@mailplus.wisc.edu](mailto:MilwaukeeFathersCovidStudy@mailplus.wisc.edu) or (608) 218-4771

**Do you want to take an online survey?**  
Please let us know on the registration form linked above.

**You get \$25 for completing the survey.**

*Please share this announcement with others!*