



COVID-19 and Low-Income Noncustodial Fathers

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New Research on the Child Support Landscape in Wisconsin
Wednesday, January 11, 2023

Overview

In this study, we explored pandemic-related difficulties among vulnerable fathers in Milwaukee, including:

- new or heightened financial challenges
- parenting challenges
- challenges accessing needed services



Background

- Disproportionate impact of the pandemic on Milwaukee
 - Specifically, among Black communities in the city
- Low-income and noncustodial fathers faced exceptional challenges during the pandemic

Bermanian et al., 2020; Harris 2020; Iztayeva, 2021;
Muñoz-Price et al., 2020; Peltz et al., 2021

Methods

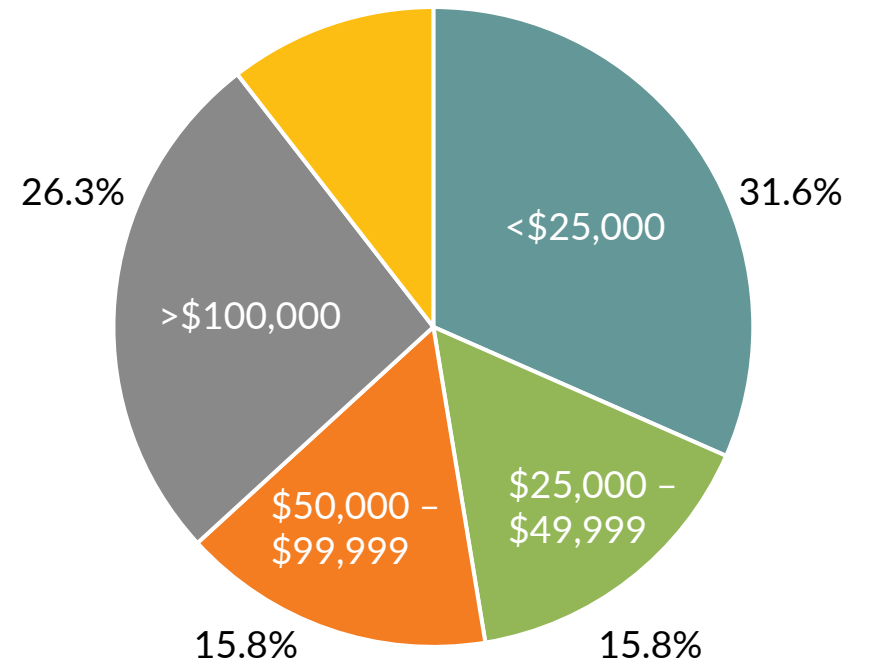
- **Survey** – Assess changes in fathers' economic circumstances and social conditions during the pandemic and factors associated with pandemic-incurred changes
- **Focus groups** – Gain deeper insight into fathers' experiences during the pandemic, including experiences related to work, parenting, health, and relationships



Participants

- Recruitment through the [Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative](#) and its partner organizations
 - **79** survey participants, **38** focus group participants
- Majority identified as Black
 - Most reported highest educational attainment as *Some college or less*
 - About 66% of fathers had children living outside of their household
- Income distribution for focus group sample:
(Note: 10.5% did not provide household income data)

Household Income: Focus Group



Survey Results

Pandemic-incurred Changes

During the pandemic, participants reported a mix of stability and change in:

- Employment
- Income
- Child support orders
- Past-due child support
- Access to child support agencies and family courts

Financial Stressors

- **Employment:**
 - ~ 22% of the sample reported being laid off or decrease in work
 - ~ 54% reported no changes to employment
 - ~ 22% reported an increase in hours or starting new employment
- Reduced **access** to child support agencies and family courts reported by 19–24% of respondents
- Most respondents reported no change in ability to pay child support, ability to pay rent, or healthcare coverage
 - ...but many did report **heightened financial stressors** of various kinds.

Relationship Stressors

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



Changes in Time Spent with Children

- Fathers with children living in another household more likely to report having less time with their child during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Fathers whose youngest child was between 0–5 years old more likely to report having more time with their child



Changes in Income

- **Educational attainment** was associated with pandemic impact on income
 - Over half of fathers with a 4-year degree or higher reported no change in income
 - Nearly half of fathers without a completed college degree reported decreases in income.
- **Changes in income** also impacted fathers' ability to pay child support.
 - Most fathers reported no change in ability to pay child support
 - Fathers with decreased incomes did report more difficulty paying child support

Focus Group Results

Pandemic Devastation

Most participants experienced devastating losses resulting from the pandemic, including deaths of family and friends from COVID, and the toll of the pandemic on mental health and well-being

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.



Pandemic Impacts: Finances and Employment

Participants' experiences related to finances and employment during the pandemic were strikingly varied. **Two consistent findings:**

- The pandemic incurred heightened financial stress for fathers, regardless of financial stability.
- Many fathers adjusted their work lives in response to school and daycare closures.

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,...

Pandemic Impacts: Parenting and Co-Parenting

Striking variations in parenting and co-parenting experiences during the pandemic. Some noncustodial fathers reporting increased time and closeness with children and strengthened co-parenting during the pandemic; others reporting reduced contact with children and increased conflict with custodial parents.

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...

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

Experiences with Child Support Payments, Child Support Agencies, and Family Courts

Most participants reported little change in their experiences paying child support and their perception of child support services due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most 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.



[Family court] 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.

Discussion and Implications

Policy and Practice Implications

1. Consider **temporary order changes** for temporary changes in circumstance, as when noncustodial parents substantially reduced work hours to be available to children during periods of school and daycare closure.
2. Provide (or increase) **training for child support professionals** on the range of pandemic-incurred changes to fathers' parenting engagement and financial circumstances.
3. Recognize **differential impacts** of the pandemic on particular groups of fathers; and need for policies and services that are responsive to these distinctions.
4. Identify **outreach strategies** to (re-)engage fathers who experienced difficulties and delays in their efforts to access child support services during the pandemic.
5. Establish or deepen **connections** between local child support agencies and community organizations serving fathers to help connect fathers to resources.

Research Implications

- Explore the experiences and intervention needs of a broader cross-section of fathers in Wisconsin.
- Investigate how noncustodial fathers and custodial mothers who experienced improved communication and reduced conflict during the pandemic achieved this result and how these achievements can be maintained
- Investigate how noncustodial and custodial parents who experienced deterioration in their relationships can be supported to restore and strengthen their relationships



Thank you!

Thank you to the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families for funding this study via The Child Support Research Agreement.

Thank you to our community partner,
The Milwaukee Fatherhood Initiative.

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