



# Research Brief

## Healthy Relationships, Employment, and Reentry

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The United States continues to experience a high unemployment rate — estimated at about 8% of the population — and that rate is much higher for chronically unemployed individuals with significant barriers to employment, such as long-term receipt of public assistance, homelessness, or a criminal record. Of these barriers, a criminal record is one of the most difficult-to-overcome due to employer discrimination against applicants with criminal backgrounds and many occupations being off-limits, making formerly incarcerated jobseekers the most disadvantaged applicants in the labor pool (Holzer, Raphael, & Stoll, 2003; Bushway, 2003).

**65 million Americans, about one in four U.S. adults, who have a criminal record face a significant barrier to entry and success in the workforce (Rodriguez & Emsellem, 2011).**

Chronic unemployment, incarceration, and poverty profoundly impact families and children. Twenty-two percent of U.S. children live in poverty, and nearly 10% live in extreme poverty — less than 50% of the federal poverty level (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). More than 1.7 million U.S. children have an incarcerated parent (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), and more than 17 million children are in the child support system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Single parenthood and lack of father involvement are also associated with higher poverty for children; for example, more than 47% of children in female-headed households with no spouse present live in poverty,

compared with 10.9% of children in married-couple families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).



What roles do healthy relationships play in addressing these problems and how do employment and incarceration affect the ability to form and maintain healthy relationships? Healthy relationships with spouses, partners, and children can have positive effects on employment, earnings, and recidivism; likewise, employment, earnings, and economic stability can positively impact the health of relationships and rates of recidivism. Yet employment programs targeting those with the greatest barriers often do not leverage the benefits of healthy relationships on employment and recidivism outcomes, and healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood interventions do not always hold employment as a primary goal to help facilitate quality relationships and help ensure adequate resources for children.

Programs designed to support healthy relationships and responsible fatherhood and those designed to provide employment services to individuals with barriers to employment share many common goals and overlapping target

- **Healthy relationship programming** includes programming focused on promoting healthy relationships through building interpersonal skills such as effective communication, conflict resolution, as well as effective parenting and financial health. This programming can take the form of classroom instruction, small group activities, and counseling, and a wide range of curricula are available (Ooms et al., 2006).
- **Responsible fatherhood programming** promotes the involvement and engagement of fathers in the lives of their children, including establishing paternity, providing emotional and financial support, collaborative parenting with the child's mother, and acting as positive role models (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1996). Typically targeted at low income and noncustodial fathers, these programs employ classroom instruction, support groups, and mentoring, and may include job search assistance, job training, parenting skills classes and assistance with meeting child support obligations (Ooms et al., 2006).
- **Employment services** for the chronically unemployed typically combine job search assistance, job placement, and job referrals with training, skill development, and supportive services aimed at increasing success in the labor market. Work readiness and "soft skills" classes are used to address learning needs in areas such as cooperation with supervisors, punctuality, and personal presentation, while services such as transportation, child care, and assistance with professional clothing are used to mitigate barriers to successful employment. Other basic employment services include help writing resumes, help with interviewing skills, and financial literacy courses.

populations; notably, the noncustodial fathers, reentering citizens, and chronically unemployed individuals served by these initiatives who are disproportionately low-income African American men (Hughes & Wilson, 2002; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Though programs' principal goals and practices differ substantially, they may still complement one another.

This brief will provide an overview of the evidence supporting the interrelatedness of employment, healthy relationships, family well-being, and recidivism. It will also give the perspectives of expert program practitioners who are successfully integrating programming related to employment, prison reentry, healthy relationships, and responsible fatherhood. Finally, this brief will offer program and policy recommendations for leveraging the positive impacts of healthy relationships on employment and reentry and vice versa.

## The Interrelated Effects of Relationships, Employment, and Reentry

***Healthy relationships matter for employment and earnings***, particularly for men; married men work more hours and earn more money than unmarried men, perhaps in part because marrying is looked upon favorably by employers (Ahituv & Lerman, 2007). Likewise, fathers who live with or marry their child's mother work more hours and earn much higher wages than those fathers who do not marry or cohabit, while married or cohabiting fathers who separate from their child's mothers or lose touch with their children experience stagnating earnings and declines in employment. This suggests that when fathers live with their children and partners, it compels them to work more

(Lerman, 2010), possibly because being more engaged with their children motivates them to seek financial stability and meet their parental obligations (Woldoff & Cina, 2007).

**Employment and economic stability are critical for healthy relationships and families.** Just as marriage and healthy relationships impact employment and earnings, employment and earnings impact the health of relationships. When men's wages rise, they become more likely to get married and less likely to divorce (Ahituv & Lerman, 2007; Smock & Manning, 1997), and when couples' earnings increase, so does the likelihood that they will get married (Ahituv & Lerman, 2007).

Employment and economic stability, especially the employment and earnings of fathers, are also associated with the quality and stability of relationships between parents (McLanahan & Beck, 2010). Conversely, poverty, economic insecurity, and lack of employment can act as deterrents to marriage (Smock & Manning, 1997; Wilson, 1987). Men in poor economic situations are less likely to marry and more likely to divorce than men with more resources (Smock & Manning, 1997), and couples who become poor become much less likely to get married (Gibson-Davis, 2009). Poverty also negatively affects relationship quality, exacerbating strain both between partners and between parents and their children (Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010).

Employment and earnings also affect fathers' relationships with their children. Many fathers view providing financial support as their most important parental responsibility, and fathers who provide financial support are more involved with their children (Johnson, 2001). Employed noncustodial fathers are more likely to have

regular contact and be more engaged with their children (McLanahan & Beck, 2010), while fathers stressed by poverty or job loss are less likely to spend quality time with their children (Cowan et al., 2010). Moreover, noncustodial fathers' ability to provide financial support for their children may improve relationships with their children's mothers, who often function as "gatekeepers" to seeing their children. These improved relationships can result in more time spent, more engagement, and better relationships with their children (Woldoff & Cina, 2007).

**Healthy relationships support successful reentry from prison and avoiding involvement with the criminal justice system.**

Incarceration can have devastating effects on relationships, marriages, children, and families. It strains relationships and leads to relationship dissolution and divorce

(Wildeman & Western, 2010), makes it difficult for men to maintain relationships with mothers and children (Waller & Swisher, 2006), and increases risk factors for poor child outcomes (Braman & Wood, 2003; Herman-Stahl, Kan, & McKay, 2008), leading to behavior problems, aggression, truancy, delinquency, drug and alcohol use, and social marginalization in children (Maldonado, 2006; Wildeman & Western, 2010).

Conversely, healthy relationships and marriages have positive effects on reentry from prison, recidivism, and

criminal behavior. There is extensive evidence that married men have more successful transitions out of incarceration than unmarried men (Visher & Travis, 2003). Married men and those in committed relationships exiting incarceration



are also less likely to self-report using drugs or committing a new crime than unmarried men and those in more casual relationships (Visher, Knight, Chalfin, & Roman, 2009). In addition, recently released fathers who spend more time with their children experience more successful reentry (Visher, 2013).



Family relationships are critical. More than 80% of men reentering from incarceration receive some kind of family assistance, and most name family support as the most important factor in helping them stay out of prison (La Vigne, Schollenberger, & Debus, 2009). Family support, acceptance, and encouragement for formerly incarcerated individuals are associated with more success in finding employment, reduced criminal behavior, and less substance abuse (Griswold & Pearson, 2005; Visher & Travis, 2003). Moreover, prisoners who maintain family relationships while incarcerated are less likely to commit a new crime or violate parole after they are released (Maldonado, 2006). Programming oriented toward healthy family relationships appears to help manifest these impacts; prisoners who learn how to repair and maintain positive family relationships have reduced disciplinary problems while incarcerated and lower recidivism rates after release (Bayse, Allgood, & Van Wyk, 1991), and family involvement in reentry programming is associated with less drug use, fewer mental, emotional and physical problems, and less recidivism (Herman-Stahl et al., 2008; Visher & Travis, 2003).

The number of incarcerated mothers is increasing, but less is known about them than incarcerated fathers. Two-thirds of incarcerated women have children under 18 years old, about 15% have infants under six weeks old, and about 5% are pregnant at the time they become incarcerated. Nationally, about 1.3 million children have a mother who is incarcerated (Braithwaite, Treadwell, & Arriola, 2005). Just as with fathers, a mother's incarceration can have profound negative effects on family relationships; even short periods of incarceration can increase a mother's likelihood of divorce, reduce the likelihood that she will reside with a child's father, and seriously strain mother-child relationships. Indeed, the separation of a mother from her children is considered the most damaging factor of her incarceration (Arditti & Few, 2006).

***Child support affects relationships and employment in complex ways.*** The child support system has a range of impacts on marriage, father involvement with children, and employment. This impact is especially true in light of large arrearages that can accrue while a noncustodial parent is incarcerated. Strict child support enforcement can act as a disincentive to coparenting and cohabitation between parents, and is associated with lower rates of marriage (McLanahan & Beck, 2010). Child support enforcement can also act as a disincentive to employment for noncustodial parents and may drive them toward informal labor markets and the underground economy (Griswold & Pearson, 2005; Turetsky, 2007). This withdrawal from employment can also mean withdrawal from their children and families as it strains relationships. This scenario is even more challenging for parents who have been incarcerated. Many states regard incarceration as "voluntary unemployment" and allow arrearages to accumulate, often to tens of thousands of dollars (Turetsky, 2007).

The number of noncustodial mothers is increasing, but there is a lack of information regarding the causes or implications of this trend. Though very little research exists, we do know that these mothers face significant social stigma for having lost custody of their children and are often perceived as “deviant” (Bemiller, 2008). The increase in the number of noncustodial mothers parallels an increase in the number of fathers who have sole custody of their children — about one in six custodial parents in the United States are fathers (Grall, 2011). Custodial fathers are more likely to be employed and less likely to live in poverty than custodial mothers (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013), but little additional information is available about their characteristics. There is a clear need for further research into the characteristics of noncustodial mothers, the impacts on children of not residing with their mother, and the services that hold promise in supporting engagement and reconciliation of noncustodial mothers with their children. Likewise, further investigation is needed on the services that would be most helpful to custodial fathers in supporting them and the well-being of their children.

Although pressuring unemployed noncustodial parents to pay child support when they have no money to do so is fruitless, engaging them in employment programming that allows them to earn income to meet their obligations can have a positive impact (Griswold & Pearson, 2005). Many States, recognizing that noncustodial parents seldom have the means to comply with child support orders while incarcerated, are implementing promising practices to help them avoid uncollectable arrearages. For example, States such as California, New York, Oregon,

and Massachusetts allow for the suspension or modification of child support orders while the parent is incarcerated. Although this type of modification does not happen automatically upon incarceration, a number of States — including Connecticut, Michigan, New Jersey, and Washington — have implemented outreach and assistance programs for incarcerated parents to help them understand their options (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). At the Federal level, the Office of Child Support Enforcement at the U.S.



Department of Health and Human Services has recently made eight demonstration grants totaling \$6.2 million to State child support agencies to develop employment services programming for noncustodial parents that include case management, parenting classes, order

modification, and helping to reduce State-owed debt in addition to employment placement and retention services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

## **Lessons from Practitioners**

Interviews were conducted with leaders at seven programs that integrate responsible fatherhood, healthy relationships, and reentry services with employment interventions. The experiences of these practitioners closely mirror the findings in the literature. Providers reported that healthy relationships, employment, and successful reentry from incarceration affect and reinforce one another and that integrated programming approaches are effective in addressing these interrelated issues.

### ***On the impact of responsible fatherhood and healthy relationships on employment:***

All of the practitioners stated that healthy relationships impact successful employment

outcomes for their participants and all observed positive changes in participants' work-readiness as a result of healthy relationship and responsible fatherhood training. Practitioners often attributed these impacts to the idea that similar relationship skills are critical to success in work and to success in family and household partnerships — the skills one uses to cooperate with a spouse are the same as the skills used to cooperate with supervisors, coworkers, and customers. These include effective communication, anger management, and conflict-resolution skills.

***On the impact of employment on healthy relationships and fatherhood:***

All of the interviewed practitioners also reported observing improvements in the quality of relationships and in the involvement of fathers with children as a result of participants gaining employment. They attributed these improvements to factors such as improved self-esteem resulting from being able to provide financially for children, reductions in money-related relationship stress, and custodial parents allowing more access to children based on the noncustodial parent's employment and financial contributions. All of these observations parallel the findings in the literature, which show that many fathers are motivated by traditional "provider" roles, that relationships are stressed by poverty and money issues, and that custodial parents may act as "gatekeepers" for access to children and can be influenced to provide more access when the noncustodial parent is working and providing support.

***On the impact of responsible fatherhood and healthy relationships on reentry:***

Most practitioners also reported observing some reductions in criminal justice system involvement as a result of healthy relationships

and believed that healthy relationship and responsible fatherhood programming contributed to these changes. Possible reasons cited for this effect included the ideas that greater family stability and support could act as a disincentive to criminal behavior, that anger management training can impact criminal behavior, and that when parents are motivated to act as role models for their children this may reduce parental criminal behavior and potential juvenile justice involvement for children. Providers also suggested that healthy relationships and related programming had an especially strong impact on reducing domestic crimes.

***Practitioners' effective practices:***

All of the practitioners interviewed operate programming that, by design, integrates employment services with healthy relationship and responsible fatherhood services. When asked about the most effective and promising practices for making this integration work, practitioners touched on a number of common themes repeatedly. Most of the practitioners noted the effectiveness of taking a holistic approach to serving participants and their families; treating the "whole person" comprehensively as opposed to addressing a particular problem. For example, programs may co-enroll participants in parallel fatherhood and work-readiness coursework or incorporate aspects of fatherhood and employment within a single curriculum. Similarly, practitioners noted the importance of offering comprehensive services and cultivating strong referral partners to provide services that were not offered in-house. Multiple practitioners also noted the effectiveness of mentoring as a means of building positive, trusting relationships.



## Recommendations

Healthy relationships, employment, and criminal justice system involvement are interrelated and can have substantial effects on one another. Moreover, practitioners find that interventions that address these factors simultaneously have a positive impact on participant outcomes in many ways. The following recommendations for program- and policy-level action are intended to help leverage the advantages of healthy relationships in employment and recidivism outcomes and vice versa and to more effectively address a set of interrelated social problems with integrated solutions and partnerships.

**The National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families has a Virtual Library with more than 600 free materials in a variety of formats, including factsheets, research to practice briefs, brochures, pamphlets, training resources, program reports or evaluations, and research reports. Visit [www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org](http://www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org) to learn more.**

### Recommendations for programming

Employment programs serving people exiting prison and others with significant barriers to employment should consider the ways in which they can leverage and support healthy relationships to improve employment and recidivism outcomes. This may include connecting employment program participants with relationship education providers, counseling, or family reconciliation as part of the scope of available supportive services. Programs may also educate participants on the potential positive effects of healthy relationships and marriage on their employment and earnings prospects, and actively engage spouses, partners, and other family members in



supporting participants in their search for employment. Finally, in light of the impacts that child support arrearages can have on both employment and relationships for noncustodial parents, employment program providers may consider ways they can help participants meet their own needs while fulfilling their obligations to support their families. This could include partnering with local child support enforcement, assisting with child support order modification, designating a program staff liaison to work with child support courts, integrating responsible fatherhood programming, or offering classes on financial literacy and personal finance.

**Many considerations are involved in program planning, development, and implementation. For more tips and tools on developing programs and partnerships to promote healthy marriage and relationship education contact the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families. The Resource Center's website features helpful tips and tools on full integration and program development for State, local, and Tribal stakeholders. Visit [www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org](http://www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org) to learn more.**

**Programs promoting healthy relationships and responsible fatherhood** should recognize the critical roles that employment and economic achievement play in sustaining healthy relationships, facilitating marriage, and supporting child well-being. When capacity and funding allow, these programs should consider offering some employment programming in-house as part of their regular scope of services in order to maximize access and minimize barriers to participation. These services can range from relatively low-cost, short-term options such as providing job postings and computers for job searches; mid-term options such as offering job search assistance, job clubs, and work-readiness classes; or comprehensive, evidence-based employment strategies such as transitional jobs or alternative staffing interventions. In many cases however, partnering with existing local employment programs may be the more efficient option. In some areas, the best partner may be the local public workforce office, known as One-Stop Career Centers, and in other areas the best partner may be a community-based organization with existing expertise in serving individuals facing barriers to employment.



### **Recommendations for safety-net service providers**

**Child support enforcement** entities are increasingly recognizing that noncustodial parents with child support obligations need employment opportunities and adequate earned income in order to meet those obligations. As such, they are shifting their efforts toward facilitating economic advancement for those parents while encouraging positive coparenting. Furthering efforts to support employment

programming through child support systems and funding streams will help ensure that all noncustodial parents who are willing to work to meet their obligations will have the opportunity to do so while still meeting their own needs.

**Public benefits systems** such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs (SNAP) have the goals of supporting well-being, healthy relationships, self-sufficiency, and transitions to employment for low-income individuals and families — many of whom may be impacted directly or indirectly by the child support and criminal justice systems. To facilitate employment success, these systems could consider adopting less restrictive approaches to engaging recipients in effective strategies that promote success in the workforce — particularly for those that have substantial barriers to employment.

**Workforce development initiatives**, particularly programming aimed at noncustodial parents, individuals reentering communities from incarceration, and other low-income chronically unemployed populations, should include healthy relationship and responsible fatherhood services as allowable activities and encourage the integration of those services within existing employment models. Not only are the interpersonal skills transferable to the workplace, but they also strengthen the family as a support system. By acknowledging and addressing the impacts of healthy relationships and fatherhood, these initiatives can improve employment, earnings, and recidivism outcomes of the jobseekers they serve.



**Healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood initiatives** should continue to include employment interventions as allowable activities, including intensive program models such as transitional jobs, which offer comprehensive services including subsidized wages. By acknowledging and addressing the negative impact that lack of employment and economic stability have on families, initiatives can more effectively achieve their goals of fostering healthy relationships, effective parenting, father involvement, self-sufficiency, and family well-being.

**Integration of evidence-based and promising solutions** that address the comprehensive needs of low-income, chronically unemployed parents and their families are critical to increasing economic opportunity, family stability, and healthy relationships. It is particularly critical to implement strategies that combine opportunities to earn income with skill development including basic skills, occupational skills, and relationship skills.

## Conclusion

There is ample evidence to conclude that healthy relationships support positive employment and earnings outcomes for jobseekers as well as protect against recidivism and criminal behavior. Moreover, the economic stability provided by employment and earned income is critical for forming and maintaining healthy relationships and responsible parenting. The strong correlations between these factors suggest that holistic programs that simultaneously address relationship skills, responsible fatherhood, successful reentry, and access to employment would provide participants and their families with the greatest chance to achieve positive outcomes in economic achievement, self-sufficiency, child well-being, and family stability. The experience of practitioners currently integrating these services supports that idea.

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