

AN EVALUATION OF THE PARENT OPPORTUNITY PROJECT

JESSICA PEARSON, PH.D.
NANCY THOENNES, PH.D.
CENTER FOR POLICY RESEARCH
1570 EMERSON STREET
DENVER, CO 80218
303/837-1555

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 1996, the Denver Division of Child Support Enforcement initiated the Parent Opportunity Project (POP), a project aimed at linking low-income, non-custodial parents to a variety of services with the objective of increasing their ability to pay child support and maintain contact with their children. Modeled after the Parents' Fair Share Demonstration Project, POP involved recruiting un- and underemployed non-custodial parents who were not paying child support and providing them with employment assistance, individualized treatment by the child support enforcement agency, help with access and visitation, participation in regular peer support groups aimed at enhancing self esteem and promoting parenting behaviors, and case management. The Center for Policy Research (CPR) conducted a qualitative and quantitative assessment of POP that included collecting demographic information about POP participants, their referral for various services, and monitoring outcomes with respect to child support and employment over a six-month period of time. In addition, CPR conducted a focus group with participants and interviews with program architects and service providers to gauge the perceived impact of POP and its utility.

The evaluation reveals the difficulties in targeting, recruiting and serving poor, non-custodial parents who are behind in their child support payment and in need of assistance with employment, parenting and access and visitation. Program administrators found it extremely difficult to recruit project participants and secure their regular participation in various program components. Ultimately, word-of-mouth techniques and mailings by the child support agency were the most effective recruitment techniques, while referrals at the court and hospital-based paternity programs were the least. Like TANF recipients in Denver, their female counterparts, most of the 40 non-custodial parents recruited for POP were Latino (66%), never-married (70%) and poorly educated, with half lacking a high school diploma. Only 27 percent were employed when they entered the program; the rest had limited work skills and history. More often than not, their educational and employment problems are compounded with housing problems (92%), transportation limitations (76%), and a criminal history (65%). In addition to participating in weekly peer support group meetings, the case manager recommended that most participants meet with a child support technician to review their situation (80%), get help with job search (73%), and work on their parenting skills (53%) and visitation situation (40%). On average, these parents owed \$9,410 in back support which they were supposed to pay back in monthly increments of \$171 in addition to making average monthly child support payments of \$242.

As in other areas of their life, many POP participants failed to follow through with these recommendations and had only fleeting interactions with the case manager before they disappeared. Most failed to attend peer support group meetings and/or appointments for employment or child support assistance. Indeed, only about a third of the individuals recruited for POP wound up participating. Given these low participation levels and the magnitude of the problems these individuals confronted, it is perhaps not surprising that their employment and child support payment behavior did not change in the six months following their enrollment in POP. Most of those who began the project employed were still employed six months later, while those who began without employment remained unemployed. Similarly, while those in POP for three months or more had paid 31 percent of their child support obligation during the six months preceding their enrollment, they paid a statistically comparable 37 percent in the ensuing six months.

Although POP did not produce measurable changes in employment and child support payment patterns over a six-month period of time, participants reported a great deal of satisfaction with the program and credited it with helping them to parent, visit with their children, and feel hopeful about the future. They particularly valued the support they received from the case manager and the informal counseling he provided on an as-needed basis. Unfortunately, it was impossible to measure whether participants demonstrated changes in parenting skill and/or access and visitation patterns.

Although the program is valued by its administrators as a means of providing incentives for cooperation rather than only sanctions for non-cooperation, staff and service providers would like to experiment with different ways of improving its effectiveness. One recommendation is to adopt a stronger system of sanctions and incentives aimed at encouraging commitment to the program. Of course, it is hard to identify an attractive system of “carrots and sticks” for non-custodial parents who lack access to TANF, food stamps, Medicaid, subsidized housing and other support services, and where there are no serious sanctions for non-participation such as incarceration. It remains to be seen what financial incentives and adjustments by child support agencies will appeal to this very debt-ridden and habitually non-compliant population. It also remains to be seen whether it is possible to enhance participant commitment by offering clients access to a fuller array of employment services like supported work and apprenticeship opportunities rather than the limited assistance with job seeking offered in POP. Finally, it may be necessary to experiment with home visits and other more aggressive outreach efforts to elicit and sustain client participation.

Fortunately, Colorado will have a chance to incorporate the lessons of POP into other publicly-funded fatherhood programs for low-income families and experiment with these and other program improvements. Among the programs underway are the OCSE-funded responsible fatherhood

initiatives in El Paso and Denver County, the latter of which will focus on formerly incarcerated fathers. We look forward to seeing whether these programs better succeed at serving poor non-custodial parents with many barriers to employment.

INTRODUCTION

In October 1996, the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement awarded Colorado a Supplemental Grant to its Model Office Project to develop and test an intervention aimed at helping fathers become more financially and emotionally involved in the lives of their children. The goals of the project were to:

- ' Promote community awareness and support for fatherhood, paternity and child support;
- ' Increase the ability of low-income non-custodial parents to pay child support and establish or re-establish contact with their children;

In the ensuing two years, The Colorado Child Support Enforcement Division undertook several steps to accomplish these objectives.

- ' Participated in a multi-agency collaboration to promote fatherhood in Colorado through the conduct of a media campaign;
- ' Developed promotional materials about paternity including brochures for parents, posters and a newsletter for hospital staff;
- ' Collaborated with other state agencies to launch and conduct an annual conference on fatherhood, the Fatherhood Summit;
- ' Collaborated with the Denver Child Support Enforcement Division to initiate and conduct a pilot project aimed at linking low-income, non-custodial parents with a variety of services with the objective of increasing their ability to pay child support and establish or re-establish contact with their children.

This report summarizes the results of the Colorado child support agency's first demonstration project for low income fathers. Known as the Parent Opportunity Project (POP), it sought to test ways of targeting un- and under-employed, non-custodial parents who are not paying child support and providing them with services aimed at increasing their financial and emotional involvement in the lives of their children. The report begins with background on the POP project and the reason why it was undertaken.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE

Despite the adoption of more aggressive measures to establish paternity and establish and enforce child support orders, there is growing recognition that the child support enforcement program has only limited effectiveness with low-income and unmarried non-custodial parents (Johnson and Doolittle, 1996; Furstenberg et al, 1992). While middle class parents who are stably employed and reside continuously in a single area can be readily located and subjected to wage withholding procedures, low income fathers are frequently too mobile and have work histories that are too sporadic to be affected by these measures. Since many of them are not married to the mother of their children, it is often impossible to establish the legal link needed to create a child support order. Still other fathers of poor children are so poor themselves, that they lack the ability to make a difference in their child's standard of living. For example, in 1990, at least 29 percent of all non-custodial fathers had incomes after paying child support that were low enough to render them eligible for food stamps (Sorensen, 1997). In a recent reanalysis of a nationally representative survey of non-custodial fathers, Mincy and Sorensen (1998:47) estimate that at least 16.2 percent and possibly as 33.2 percent of young non-custodial fathers are unable to pay child support without "further impoverishing themselves or their families." Finally, with few incentives to cooperate with CSE, many low income fathers and mothers favor informal arrangements over formal child support orders (Edin and Lein, 1997, Waller, 1997).

Not surprisingly, perhaps, state programs have achieved very limited success in generating child support monies from low-income, non-custodial fathers. In 1990, only 35 percent of low-income non-custodial fathers paid child support. Among never married parents, the problem is even more severe. Census data reveal that only 24 percent of never-married women had a child support order and only about 15 percent reported receiving a child support payment in 1991 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991). Among young, poor, non-custodial parents, dubbed "turnips," less than 10 percent pay child support (Mincy and Sorensen, 1998).

Enhancing the employment and earning status of men at lower education and skill levels may be the most promising way to encourage poor fathers to assume more parental responsibilities, including the payment of child support. Black single men who are stably employed are twice as likely to marry the mother of the children they conceive out-of-wedlock (Testa and Krogh, 1995). In a similar vein, a study of 289 single, teen mother families on AFDC in Wisconsin finds father's work experience the strongest predictor of remaining involved in the child's life (Danzinger and Radin, 1990). Unmarried parents who are employed are significantly more likely to acknowledge paternity

on a voluntary basis (Pearson and Thoennes, 1996). Finally, several studies find that most parents with child support orders who are not paying regularly attribute their non-payment to economic factors and unstable employment patterns (Pearson, et al, 1996; Haskins, 1985; Braver, et al., 1993).

Helping fathers with their access problems may be another way to improve child support payment. Although the research evidence is mixed (see Weitzman, 1985; Berkman, 1986) most studies find a positive correlation between visitation and support performance. For example, two decades ago, Chambers(1979) found that fathers with little or no contact with their children after the divorce paid only about 34 percent of their child support, while fathers in regular contact paid 85 percent. A decade ago, Seltzer (1991) reached similar conclusions when she analyzed a national probability sample of adults in the United States in 1987-1988 and noted that two-thirds of those with frequent contact paid child support while payments were made by only one-fifth of those with no contact. Although it has been impossible to discern a causal relationship because the two phenomenon are so interrelated and visitation is so difficult to accurately measure (Pearson and Thoennes, 1988), it is clear that fathers who see their children do a better job of paying support.

In light of these findings, some researchers and advocates for low income families have argued for child support to develop policies that take into account the employment and visitation problems that many non-custodial fathers face. The Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement has responded in a couple of different ways. First, it supported The Child Access Demonstration Projects which in seven states involved the use of mediation, parent education, counseling and other measures aimed at assisting parents to communicate about the needs of their children and promote access following parental separation and divorce. Although the evaluation of the Child Access Demonstration Projects revealed that the interventions had only a limited ability to improve child support payment patterns or resolve problems for extremely disputatious and highly conflicted couples, they did assist many non-custodial parents in the resolution of their access problems, particularly with respect to the elaboration of unspecified visitation orders (Price, et al, 1994; Pearson, et al., 1996; Pearson and Thoennes, 1997; Pearson and Thoennes, 1998). The federal OCSE currently awards \$10 million annually in grants to states to fund projects aimed at facilitating access for non-custodial parents.

In a second demonstration project, The Parents' Fair Share Demonstration (PFS), the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), and the Department of Labor experimented with a comprehensive approach to assisting under- or unemployed nonresident parents become more financially and emotionally involved in the lives of their children. The model that was adopted at seven research sites included employment assistance,

peer support, case management, and temporarily lowered child support orders. PFS was initiated with the hope that parents who participate would establish and maintain contact with their children and meet their child support obligations at higher rates than their non-serviced counterparts (Johnson and Doolittle, 1995).

Still newer demonstration and evaluation activity is underway aimed at promoting responsible fatherhood by addressing the access and employment needs of non-custodial parents. In 1997, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement made multi-year awards to seven states to conduct demonstration projects that provide services to non-custodial parents in an effort to promote their financial and emotional participation in the lives of their children. In 1997, HHS also granted Washington State the first of what is expected to be many waivers, permitting the use of federal funds normally restricted to child support enforcement to support programs to help non-custodial parents.

Although there is a lot of enthusiasm for programs that promote responsible fatherhood, there is little information on their effectiveness. The earliest review of responsible fatherhood programs was conducted by the Lewin Group (1997) with the support of the ASPE and the Ford Foundation. Based on visits to five fatherhood programs that are believed to be representative of the more developed programs in the country, the authors of this “evaluability assessment,” conclude that the programs they visited “appear not to be ready for a formal impact evaluation.” They attribute this to the newness of the programs and the evolving state of their recruitment methods and program services, the lack of automated systems for tracking and reporting on clients, and the small number of fathers served in most of the programs (The Lewin Group, 1997:111).

More recently, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation has released its first report on the Parents’ Fair Share demonstration projects. The report concludes that during an 18 month follow-up, PFS led to an increase in child support payments for parents who do not traditionally respond to enforcement efforts, but that the project did not produce increases in employment and earnings. The increases in child support payment were attributed to the discovery of previously unreported employment in the course of implementing the PFS case referral and intake process at all the sites as well as substantial increases in child support payments among those referred to PFS services at three of the seven project sites (Doolittle et al, 1998).

The evaluation of Colorado’s Parent Opportunity Project offers an excellent opportunity to add to the literature on how programs for non-custodial parents may be organized and to assess the outcomes they produce for participants, their families, child support agencies and society as a whole.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The goal of the evaluation was to answer a variety of basic questions about POP and the outcomes it might be expected to have. They are as follows.

- ' How can low-income fathers best be contacted about the availability of fatherhood programs? How effective are overtures at the hospital when their babies are born? Can they be recruited during negotiation conferences at the child support agency? How effective is recruitment at the court and mailings to delinquent child support obligors? How important are informal recruitment mechanisms?
- ' What is the level of interest in fatherhood programs? Who expresses an interest? Who shows up? What is the level of attrition? What are the reasons for attrition? How can attrition be reduced?
- ' What types of services are of greatest interest? What community collaborations work best to meet these service needs? What are the areas of unmet need?
- ' What are the consequences of fatherhood programs? What impact do they have on the employment, earnings and child support payments that participants make? What impact do they have on access and visitation patterns? Relationships between parents and their children? What can programs reasonably expect to accomplish?
- ' What are the sources of community support and opposition to fatherhood programs for low-income men? What are the biggest barriers to program success? What are the key ingredients of effective programs? What do they accomplish for the child support agency?

The evaluator, the Center for Policy Research (CPR), pursued a variety of qualitative and quantitative approaches to generate answers to these questions. First, CPR generated a set of data collection instruments that captured information on the source of each referral to the program, demographic characteristics of participants, family composition, relationships with children and the other parent, needs with respect to employment and child access, client self esteem, referrals for various services, compliance with the components of a case plan, case progress and outcomes with respect to employment, child support payment, and contact with children.

CPR observed a peer support group for POP participants. CPR staff conducted a focus group with a dozen program participants. Finally, CPR interviewed the POP director and case manager as well as personnel affiliated with the employment and child support components of the program. This report describes the results of this investigation.

COMPONENTS OF COLORADO'S POP

Colorado's Parent Opportunity Project was modeled after the Parents' Fair Share Demonstration Project. It was initiated by the State Paternity Coordinator, Robert Conklin, and conducted in the City and County of Denver with the support of the Denver Child Support Enforcement Division of the Denver Department of Social Services. The Center for Policy Research served as the POP evaluator and provided technical assistance in the development of the program as well as designing and analyzing relevant data collection forms to capture the characteristics of POP participants and their activity in the program.

Early in the development of POP, Colorado retained Raymond Jackson, a coordinator of PFS in Grand Rapids, Michigan, to serve as a consultant to the project and to train the program architects, staff and administrators of relevant child support and employment training programs on the components of a successful program. In addition, CPR conducted a national review of fatherhood programs and interviewed administrators of relevant programs about the types of needed services and the most effective ways of recruiting participants.

Like PFS and other responsible fatherhood projects, the goals of POP were to:

- ' Reduce poverty among children by enabling their non-custodial parents to pay child support;
- ' Increase the employment and earning of non-custodial parents who are unemployed, underemployed and/or unable to support their children;
- ' Assist non-custodial parents in assuming a larger role in their children's lives in order to provide emotional as well as financial support for them.

POP eventually came to encompass several major components:

EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING: This was a key component of POP. It consisted of individual assessment and referral designed to help participants secure long-term, stable employment at a wage level that would allow them to support themselves and their children. POP relied on the Employment Services Division of the Denver Department of Social Services to provide employment assistance to program participants. Counselors at the Employment Services Division provide job assistance to Denver's TANF clients as well as the general public on a walk-in basis. In addition to individual assessment and referral, the Division offers four job readiness classes dealing with interviewing skills, applications, and references and resume writing. The division also sponsors a Job Club which provides job seekers with support and features presentations by employers and job developers. The Division can also arrange for clients to receive career track training and specialized employment services in off-site settings.

RESPONSIVE CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT: POP participants were eligible for a variety of special treatments by the Denver Child Support Division. While they were in the training phase of the project or during their job search, participants could receive a temporary abatement of their child support order for 90 days. Pending successful completion of the program, participants would be permanently relieved of their support obligation and interest charges for the three months of participation. Participants were also eligible for special reviews of their child support order levels and adjustments to reflect their actual earnings. Finally, some participants were eligible for suspension and/or adjustment of debt and other past-due support obligations in order to enhance the payment of current support. All project participants with child support concerns were referred to a single child support supervisor who understood the project objectives and the economic situation that poor, unmarried fathers face. The Denver Juvenile Court adopted a standard order to compel unemployed and underemployed obligors who are not paying their child support to attend a POP orientation and participate in the project.

ACCESS AND VISITATION INTERVENTIONS: The architects of POP made special arrangements for participants with custody and/or visitation problems to receive mediation and/or legal services (on a limited basis). Private attorneys agreed to provide mediation and legal services to non-custodial parents on a no-cost or reduced-cost basis. Participants with custody and/or visitation problems were referred to these providers and arrangements were made to render services. Although it was not used, POP organizers negotiated arrangements with a local supervised visitation facility for participants to visit their children in a monitored settings. Through access and visitation grants

awarded by OCSE to Colorado, POP participants also had access to classes on parenting and the legal process of obtaining and/or modifying custody and visitation orders.

PEER SUPPORT GROUPS: The POP case manager led weekly support meetings for project participants. Like peer support in PFS, the purpose of the meetings was to inform participants about their rights and responsibilities, strengthen their commitment to work, enhance their life skills and encourage parenting behaviors. The facilitator used segments of curricula developed by MDRC and NPCL for use with low income, non-custodial fathers. The session topics included parenting behaviors, relationship issues, dealing with anger, and the legal issues entailed in obtaining visitation and access. The POP case manager facilitated most sessions; some topical sessions were led by special speakers and invited experts. For example, at one observed peer support group session dealing with parenting issues, the attendees completed a form that described the characteristics of the primary male figure in their childhood. This could be a father, stepfather, uncle or someone else. This led to a discussion of parents and children including reasons why children act out and the different ways that parents respond. Young fathers were asked to remember their own experiences as children and link them to their present situation with their own children. Since most of the men were raised with little knowledge of their biological father, it was a challenge for them to understand their past lives and apply it to the present.

CASE MANAGEMENT: Case management proved to be the heart of the POP intervention. The POP case manager played a key role in project recruitment and was personally able to attract many of the participants. Once referred to the project, many participants failed to respond to mailings, attend appointments or show up for program activities. The case manager actively tried to motivate parents to participate by phoning them, visiting them at home, driving them to and from peer support group sessions and giving them bus tokens. He was also able to link project participants to a variety of community services like food and clothing banks, housing assistance, and drug rehabilitation. He was able to respond to some of their immediate employment needs by purchasing work clothes and/or tools. Finally, the case manager helped to advocate for project participants. He accompanied participants at court hearings, intervened on their behalf with relatives and tried to assist them with the little and big problems they confronted on a day-to-day basis.

SPECIAL ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING POP

The federal funds for POP were awarded on September 30, 1996. The first case was processed on June 5, 1997. The program changed case managers in October 1997. Case recruitment and project services then began in earnest and during the ensuing year, a total of 47 individuals either completed the intake process and/or received some services.¹ Thus, it took a year for POP to become operational after funding for it was secured. This section of the report describes the special challenges the architects of POP encountered in the course of implementing this project.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMPLEXITY AND INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL RELATIONS

Responsible fatherhood programs are complex because they involve extensive multi-agency collaborations. It simply takes many agencies and service providers to offer comprehensive employment, social support and parenting assistance to poor, non-custodial fathers. The POP program was no exception. It involved a collaboration between the state and county child support agencies, a county social services office that provides employment and training, private attorneys who offer no and low-cost mediation services and legal assistance, the State court system that adjudicates child support matters, and parent education and pro se legal assistance providers who receive funding from the federal OCSE via Colorado's access and visitation grant.

One big management challenge was to identify suitable project participants. For example, POP architects spent several months trying to locate the most aggressive and effective employment training provider in the Denver area. While most providers had extensive experience working with welfare mothers, few had worked with non-custodial parents and they presented new challenges for employment providers. Providers reported being overwhelmed with the need to provide job training assistance to growing numbers of welfare recipients facing time-limited benefits and stiffer work requirements. And although several vendors were interested in serving non-custodial parents, they were hesitant about developing new training programs for fathers and cultivating needed relationships with new employers when the project architects could not commit to generating a proscribed number of participants according to a predetermined timetable.

¹Although a total of 47 individuals enrolled at some point, the number of participants for whom specific information was available actually varies. Thus, throughout this report, the number of individuals referred to will change with respect to the evaluation of client characteristics, activities, and outcomes.

Ultimately, the POP organizers chose to collaborate with the Denver Department of Social Services' own Division of Employment Training. This entity proved to have the flexibility to accommodate POP participants on an as-needed basis. The Division was able to fund the intervention with existing agency resources. Finally, Division staff was able to integrate POP participants in their on-going employment services. The downside to this arrangement, however, was that the Division treated POP participants in the same manner it handles any walk-in clients looking for employment. Unlike TANF recipients who face a series of incentives and sanctions to motivate them to participate, POP participants were not required to avail themselves of more intensive and supervised assistance with job search and support. As a result, most used the Division in a very limited way for job referrals only and did not participate in more intensive job training programs that included education and skill building components or even supervised job searches.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TARGET POPULATION

POP defined its target population as unemployed or underemployed non-custodial parents (NCPs) of children receiving TANF (or those who have previously received public assistance) who were not paying child support. The following criteria were used to determine if a non-custodial parent was eligible for referral to POP by the Denver Juvenile Court.

- ' Child receiving TANF in Denver County
- ' NCP has a child support case in Denver County
- ' NCP currently not paying child support
- ' NCP not receiving SSI
- ' Paternity has been established
- ' NCP is unemployed or underemployed
- ' NCP has a legal right to work (if alien, must be legally able to work)
- ' NCP may be receiving unemployment insurance benefits
- ' NCP may be receiving public assistance if determined employable
- ' NCP is present at juvenile court hearing

For NCPs referred at hospitals, child support agencies and community settings, the POP eligibility criteria were modified to include participants where paternity had not been established.

There are clearly many challenges to identifying and serving poor, unmarried, non-custodial parents. Like other Responsible Fatherhood Projects, POP targeted parents who typically suffer from extreme social and economic isolation, instability and low levels of confidence (Johnson and

Doolittle, 1996). Many drop out and fail to show up for program activities. They also have extremely low education levels and limited job skills (Finkel and Roberts, 1994; Garfinkel, et al., 1992). For example, Mincy and Sorensen (1998) report that over half of young, poor non-custodial parents had not completed high school, had never married, and were African-American. According to the National Longitudinal Surveys of Young Men, the proportion of high school dropouts of black 18-21 year olds in 1979 was about 30 percent among those who later became unwed fathers (Lerman, 1993). The male analog to never-married mothers who are long-term recipients of public assistance, many fathers targeted for program participation have other barriers to employment and self-sufficiency including: substance abuse problems; criminal records; mental problems and psychological factors that mitigate against stable employment. These attributes of program participants make them a particularly difficult population to locate, motivate and serve.

RECRUITMENT DIFFICULTIES

POP experimented with a variety of recruitment techniques. Based on the successful experiences of several PFS sites, arrangements were made to recruit at the Denver Juvenile Court which handles paternity cases and hears a variety of matters pertaining to nonpayment of child support. Attorneys for the Denver Division of Child Support Enforcement agreed to review case files for all non-custodial parents who appeared for hearings on child support and gauged their eligibility for POP. Judges and Hearing Officers agreed to issue a Parent Opportunity Project Order to eligible NCPs referred by attorneys. The Order directed the non-custodial parent to attend the next POP orientation session which was held on a weekly basis at the Denver Department of Social Services, and to participate fully in the project for 90 days. Additionally, the Order asserted that the non-custodial parent would experience a temporary abatement of his child support order during his participation in POP and that pending his successful completion of the Program, he would experience permanent relief of the support obligation and interest charges for the months of participation outlined in the Order. At their court hearing, those eligible to participate in POP were also given an Order for a Review Hearing. This was scheduled 90 days from the initial POP Order in order to assess the compliance status of the participant with respect to POP, his pattern of participation and to make necessary adjustments in his child support order.

Despite the support of the judges and referees and the development of a pre-signed Order to facilitate the referral process, very few POP participants were flagged at the Denver Juvenile Court. Indeed, only 3 of the program's 40 participants for whom information on source of referral was available were flagged in this manner. The biggest barrier to more effective recruitment at the Denver District Court is the high rate of non-appearance by the targeted population. Observations

at the Denver Juvenile Court revealed that most of the non-custodial parents who appeared were ineligible for POP either because: they were already employed and sought an adjustment of their child support order and/or a wage assignment; they failed to appear; or their cases had been dropped by the Child Support Division because of failure to achieve service of process. Other cases were not screened for suitability for POP because paternity had not been established or was in dispute or because the non-custodial parent was incarcerated. Some cases were dropped because the court awarded a continuance and/or moved the case to another jurisdiction. Finally, some cases were unsuitable because the children were living with the non-custodial parent, genetic testing results were negative, the non-custodial parent was disabled or deceased, or the parents were reconciled. Table 1 presents the reasons why virtually all of the 96 cases scheduled before the Denver Juvenile Courts on Monday, July 14, 1997 and the 84 cases scheduled on September 7, 1997 were determined to be unsuitable for POP.

TABLE 1: REASONS WHY CHILD SUPPORT CASES ON THE CALENDAR AT DENVER JUVENILE COURT WERE UNSUITABLE FOR POP

	JULY 14, 1997 (N=96)		SEPTEMBER 8, 1997 (N=84)	
NCP employed	22.9%	(22)	17.9%	(15)
NCP failed to appear	14.6	(14)	21.4%	(18)
Case vacated	17.7%	(17)	9.5%	(8)
NCP incarcerated	7.3%	(7)	9.5%	(8)
NCP disabled or deceased	4.2%	(4)	3.6%	(3)
NCP has custody or couple reconciled	4.2%	(4)	8.3%	(7)
Paternity contested or not established	11.5%	(11)	10.7%	(9)
Case continued	6.3%	(6)	1.2%	(1)
Case dismissed, excluded, moved to another county	4.2%	(4)	8.3%	(7)
No information	6.3%	(6)	9.5%	(8)
Eligible for POP	1.0%	(1)	0%	(0)

After unsuccessful attempts to recruit at the court, POP tried to attract unmarried parents at the hospital upon the birth of their children. The recruitment effort at the hospital was conducted by a state paternity worker who makes daily visits to Denver Health Medical Center, Denver's largest health care facility for indigents, to present the paternity affidavit to unmarried mothers. In 1997,

there were 1,261 births at this hospital, 677 of which were out-of-wedlock. More than half (53.7%) of unmarried parents signed a voluntary acknowledgement form to establish paternity at the hospital. For three months, the worker distributed brochures about POP to unmarried mothers and their partners, if they were available, and explained the program along with the paternity option. POP was described as a way to help fathers find work or improve their employment situation so that they could better support their children.

Ultimately, only one of POP's 40 participants with referral information was identified in a hospital setting at the time of the baby's birth. According to the paternity worker who presented information about POP to parents, most fathers were either employed or were Mexican nationals who only spoke Spanish and had an ambiguous immigration status. The birth registration clerk at Denver Health estimates that at least 60 percent of all births are to mothers who only speak Spanish and that some days virtually 75-80 percent of births fall into this category. Although parents were polite, virtually none followed through with a phone call to the POP case manager to pursue participation in the program. Hospital personnel felt that Spanish-speaking parents are often reluctant to become involved with any "official" program that might jeopardize their presence in the U.S. and that they must be coaxed to even take advantage of health benefits for their children.

POP tried two different approaches to recruiting program participants at the child support enforcement agency. One involved mailing a POP brochure along with a cover letter from the director of the agency to a sample of delinquent child support obligors with open child support cases. Using mailing labels generated from the Automated Child Support Enforcement System (ACSES), project staff mailed letters and brochures to 300 delinquent non-custodial parents with open child support cases and a valid child support order. This mailing proved to be the biggest single source of program referrals. Ultimately 13 participants were generated from this mailing, which comprised 33 percent of the 40 individuals with referral information who participated in POP. Of course, the 13 participants represent only about 4 percent of the individuals mailed a letter. This fell slightly below the response rate of 6-10 percent noted by PFS in Los Angeles which relied on mass mailings to delinquent child support obligors to recruit participants. It should be noted that the mailing generated many more phone calls from individuals who objected to their delinquent child support classification and/or were disabled and unable to work and requested various "case-cleaning" treatments.

Some child support technicians also referred non-custodial parents to POP. Sometimes this occurred at negotiation conferences when non-custodial parents first learned about their child support obligations. It was hoped that at this moment, parents would be receptive to an overture

aimed at increasing their employment standing and earnings. Other parents were referred at later stages of the child support process. Ultimately, only four POP participants were generated through conferences with child support technicians and this comprised 10 percent of the 40 participants for whom referral information was maintained.

The most effective recruitment approach was word-of-mouth. Most program participants had heard about POP informally from other participants and sought it out on the basis of these personal testimonials. Word-of-mouth techniques were responsible for 11 of the 40 program participants or 27%. The case manager attracted three more participants through his personal ties and networks. And another three participants were referred by other programs that serve fathers in the Denver area. Taken together, 42 percent of the program participants were generated through informal methods of recruitment.

Clearly there are many barriers to recruitment. One is the antipathy that many poor, non-custodial mothers and fathers hold toward the child support program. Many studies document that fathers view the child support agency to be insensitive to their precarious job situation and that they prefer informal child support arrangements (Ash, 1997; Furstenberg, et al., 1992; Achatz and MacAllum, 1994; Johnson and Doolittle, 1995). Faced with policies that allow mothers on welfare to keep only the first \$50 of any child support payment (an incentive that many states have dropped since the enactment of PRWORA), many custodial parents also favor informal payments over formal child support orders and turn to the formal system only as a punitive mechanism when fathers fail to make a good faith effort to help their children (Edin and Lein, 1997; Waller, 1997). In this climate of mistrust, it is perhaps not surprising that the child support agency's overtures offering help are rejected by most non-custodial parents.

The isolation of many non-custodial parents and the lack of an effective means to compel them to appear or participate also present a huge challenge to those seeking to attract participants to responsible fatherhood programs. Even mandatory attendance policies and court orders requiring participation fall short when there was no sanction policy. Indeed, the PFS sites that were most successful in generating referrals at court were those that had aggressive arrest policies for non-appearance.

Many poor parents in the Denver area are Mexican nationals. In addition to the fact that some only speak Spanish and are hard to serve because of language barriers, they are frequently nervous about employment issues because of their ambiguous immigration status and are reluctant to come forward and phone a program offering help with employment. To overcome these barriers, the

project director would like to have case managers make home visits to families targeted at prenatal, at-birth, and post-partum stages and attempt to recruit participants in these more relaxed and less intimidating forums.

AGENCY CULTURE AND POLICY

While eager to extend employment assistance and other relevant services to non-custodial parents, the Denver child support agency was understandably cautious about accommodating POP participants in ways that were perceived to undermine the child support program or create inequities for other non-custodial parents. This created inevitable tensions. Thus, although the director of the child support agency agreed to temporarily abate child support orders for participating obligors for 90 days, he was unwilling to grant any extension beyond the 90 days. The agency was also unwilling to adopt a policy of forgiving child support debt and preferred that adjustments be handled on a case-by-case basis. Indeed, in some instances, a child support agency review in a POP case led to the discovery of new child support orders or the calculation of interest charges that had the net effect of increasing a participant's child support debt and/or his monthly payment obligations. And although all POP participants were referred to a single supervisor, the agency did not designate any individual technician to serve as a specialized worker for non-custodial parents. Thus, individual technicians retained control over their cases, and although the coordinating supervisor for POP could recommend that certain actions be taken, it was up to the individual technician to follow through.

Certain rules of the child support agency also made it an inhospitable setting in which to house POP. For example, for security reasons, the case manager could not take clients to his office and could only see them in grim interview rooms off the lobby of the child support agency. As a result, the case manager found it more helpful to house the project at a community-based organization with a strong track record of community service in a low-income quadrant of Denver. The Denver Inner City Parish, Inc., an interdenominational, community-based organization, has a long history of such community service in Denver's Hispanic community. In addition to housing a small program for teenaged fathers for more than nine years, the Parish runs an alternative school for students in grades 6-12, a night school offering GED instruction, an emergency food bank, a senior citizens' program, summer day camps and breakfast and lunch programs and worship and bible study groups. Although this community base improved the program's standing with project participants and led to several project referrals, it also isolated the program from the child support agency and may have made it less visible to child support technicians.

Strong fatherhood programs entail service partnerships and the mixture of many agencies coming from different perspectives. In addition to putting service components in place, the POP program architects had to continually mesh the competing priorities of the different partners. It will clearly take more program experience to fully develop the range of responses that the child support agency is willing to extend to participants in fatherhood programs.

STAFF CHARACTERISTICS

While virtually all fatherhood programs have noted the difficulties in recruiting project participants, few have discussed the special qualities needed of case managers. Because the participants are so isolated and face so many dysfunctions, the project case manager must be exceptionally active, nurturing and firm. Because the project works with those who are unable to find and retain employment on their own, they are by definition needful and desirous of attention and support. For many, the motivation to succeed in POP is grounded in a motivation to please the case manager. Hence the need to develop a personal and strong attachment with every participant.

On a practical level, the case manager has to actively pursue participants and potential participants. This includes placing phone calls and visits to those who fail to appear and checking in with those who do attend to cultivate their commitment to the program. Since much of the “teaching” and assistance is done informally, effective case management also requires that case managers be open to lengthy conversations at unscheduled times and spontaneous counseling sessions. Participants face a variety of little and big problems on a daily basis. A good case manager must know community resources well and be able to refer participants to individuals and entities that will assist them quickly and without much bureaucratic fanfare and fuss.

As brokers of a variety of community services, good case managers must be diplomats and know how to push reluctant partners for help without alienating them. They must mediate between the street and the professional world and speak the language of both. Since their duties are by definition fairly unstructured and they move in and out of an office setting, they must be self starters and able to work without close supervision. Finally, good case managers must view fatherhood projects as more than a job and bring a measure of passion, zeal and commitment to their daily activities. As the director of POP put it:

A good case manager must have the ability to empathize and relate to the clientele, an ability to say “there but for the grace go I.” They also have to have patience and persistence. These are hard clients who don’t have the work ethic. Finally, this has to be a passion. They

have to be willing to work weekends, nights, and answer a cell phone whenever it rings. It can't just be a job.

CLIENT CHARACTERISTICS AND PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

From January 1998 to October 30, 1998, the POP case manager collected at least minimal information for 47 potential participants. Fourteen of these individuals (30%) never showed up for a scheduled interview/assessment known as a project intake. Nearly half (43%) appeared for the intake as scheduled. The remaining 28% missed their first intake appointment but were rescheduled and made it to a second interview/information session. Thus, although the case manager filled out data forms for approximately 33 individuals, some information was frequently missing on many data forms and the number of participants with complete or near complete information was substantially lower (18-20). The lack of information for many participants obviates the possibility of conducting a definitive assessment of participation and outcomes and is the cause of some of the confusing changes in case numbers noted herein.

As previously discussed, most of the participants were recruited using word-of-mouth techniques or through direct contact with the case manager. The single largest source of program referrals came from letters mailed by the child support enforcement agency targeting obligors with child support orders who were not making their monthly child support payments. Small numbers of participants were referred to POP by individual child support technicians, and a few were identified at Denver Juvenile Court at their child support hearing. Only one participant was recruited at the hospital by the state paternity worker in the course of explaining the voluntary paternity acknowledgement process. Figure I summarizes how the 40 participants with referral information learned about POP.

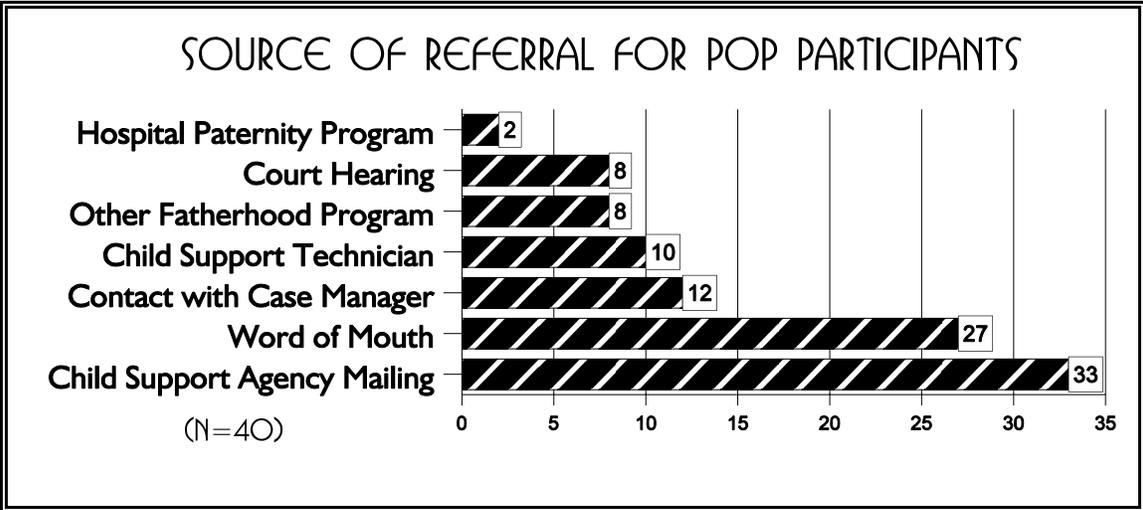


FIGURE 1

Pursuant to the project criteria, most POP participants had at least one child receiving TANF, an open child support case, were un- or under-employed, were eligible to work and were not disabled. Table 2 presents selected characteristics for the 40 participants for whom some demographic information was collected. While 94 percent of the participants were fathers, six percent were mothers. Most (66%) were Latino which reflects the fact that: Latinos comprise Denver’s largest ethnic group; the project case manager was Latino; and the project was housed in the Inner City Parish located in Denver’s traditionally Hispanic neighborhood. About a quarter (24%) of participants were African-American. The remainder were either Anglo (7%) or in some other ethnic category (2%). Virtually all participants (95%) were American citizens. All were English-speaking.

Most POP participants (51%) reported that they had completed fewer than 12 years of school. Another 24% had completed high school. The remaining quarter had either pursued some trade school training (7%) or some college (15%). One participant reported having a college degree. They ranged in age from 17-50 with the average being 32.6 years. Half of the participants were below the age of 33.5 and half were above. POP participants were evenly distributed across the age spectrum. About a quarter were in the youngest age category (17-21). Another quarter were between the ages of 22-33. About a fifth of the participants had ages between 34-40. And nearly a third (28%) were over the age of 40. Half of the participants (51%) reported living with a parent. The rest lived with a girlfriend (20%), a spouse (17%) or alone (10%).

POP tended to serve single, never-married fathers with 70 percent reporting this to be their marital status. Another 15 percent were divorced and 5 percent were separated. Nearly two-thirds of

these men reported that they were seeing someone regularly (65%). Ten percent of POP participants were married. On average, these men reported having 2.8 children with the number of children ranging from 1-7. The children ranged in age from 1-26 with the average being 9.1 years old and the median standing at 7.4 years. Nearly a third of the participants had four or more children (30%). About a quarter only had one child (27%). Half the fathers had more than 2.5 children and half had fewer than 2.5. Most fathers reported that they did not live with any of their children (78%). The remainder lived with at least one child (22%).

The average man who participated in POP had children with two different women. Nearly a third had children with only one woman (30%). The rest had children with three (17%) or four (3%) different women. While most of the fathers (68%) reported seeing at least one of their children more than once a week, more than a third (36%) had at least one child that they never saw. Fathers reported that most of the conflict they had with the mothers of their children tended to be about child support with 65 percent reporting major conflict over child support. About a third (32%) reported major conflict about custody or where the children live. Nearly half (41%) reported major conflict about when each parent sees the children.

Consistent with the recruitment focus, nearly all of POP participants were unemployed when they entered the project and completed a case intake form. Those who explained why they had left their longest-running job indicated that they had quit (26%) or been laid off (22%). As expected, these men faced many barriers to obtaining employment, the most common of which were problems with: housing (92%), transportation (76%), lack of a driver’s license (56%), lack of work history (76%), and a felony or misdemeanor incident (65%). Only 8 percent disclosed substance abuse problems. These patterns are similar to those observed for PFS participants, 50 percent of whom lacked a high school diploma and 70 percent of whom had been arrested for an offense unrelated to child support (Doolittle, et al., 1998). The characteristics of POP participants are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF 40 POP PARTICIPANTS WITH DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

	PERCENTAGE
Sex	
Male	94
Female	6
Race/Ethnicity	

TABLE 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF 40 POP PARTICIPANTS WITH DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Latino	66
African American	24
Anglo	7
Other	2
Education	
Less than high school	51
Complete high school	24
Some technical/trade school	7
Some college	15
College graduate	3
Age	
17-21	25
22-33	25
34-40	22
40+	28
Marital Status	
Single, never married	70
Divorced	15
Separated	5
Married	10
Living Arrangements	
Alone	10
With a parent	51
With a girlfriend	20
With a spouse	17
Other	2
Number of Different Women with Whom They Have Children	
One woman	30
Two women	50
Three women	17

TABLE 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF 40 POP PARTICIPANTS WITH DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Four women	3
Number of Children	
One	27
Two	23
Three	20
Four or more	30
Percent Reporting Major Disputes with the Other Parent About:	
Where the children should live	32
When each parent should see the children	41
Child support	65
Employment Status	
Employed	27

Despite these problems, most participants rated themselves very positively on a personality inventory. They also expressed strong confidence in their ability to control their lives and tended to evidence fairly low levels of fatalism. Younger fathers below the age of 40 were significantly more likely than older fathers above age 40 to express a fatalistic outlook, but there were no differences in fatalism reported by men with or without a high school degree.

Thirty individuals were involved with POP long enough for the case manager to assess their needs. In virtually all instances (90%), the case manager determined that the individual needed to participate in weekly peer support group meeting aimed at helping non-custodial parents understand their economic and socio-emotional role as parents and share their concerns with one another. Most fathers (80%) were also judged to need help with their child support situation. On average, these parents owed \$9,410 in back due support which they were supposed to pay back in monthly increments of \$171 in addition to an average monthly support payment of \$242.

The next biggest area of need was job search with nearly three-quarters (73%) rated as needing assistance. About half of the participants (53%) were determined to need help with parenting skills and nearly as many (40%) needed help with visitation. About the same proportion of participants also needed job skills training (50%) and/or a GED.

Twenty-six of the 33 participants who were assessed by the case manager remained active enough in POP to receive a case plan with recommended remedial actions aimed at addressing the above-noted needs. All 26 were referred for peer support. In addition, nearly all were referred for employment training (89%), job search assistance (69%), education (77%), transportation assistance (77%), and/or child support adjustment (62%).

In addition to these basic types of referrals, the case manager almost always provided informal counseling (89%). This involved periodic telephone calls and face-to-face meetings between POP participants and the case manager during which the participants talked about a host of issues, concerns, problems and experiences. Another common form of assistance was to refer POP participants to a variety of community services, such as a food bank (75%), drug or alcohol counseling (50%), and/or help with housing (32%). The case manager sometimes contacted the custodial parent to attempt to address problems the non-custodial parent was having with access and visitation (57%). Finally, the case manager went to court with some POP participants (39%) and provided moral support and encouragement as participants dealt with a variety of criminal and civil matters. Table 3 presents the needs of POP participants and the types of referrals and/or services provided by the POP case manager for the 26 participants who were involved long enough to receive referrals.

TABLE 3. IDENTIFIED NEEDS, REFERRALS, AND/OR TYPES OF SERVICES PROVIDED BY CASE MANAGER

	NEEDS IDENTIFIED BY CASE MANAGER/CLIENT (N=30)	REFERRALS/SERVICES PROVIDED BY CASE MANAGER (N=26)
Assistance with:		
Education	43%	77%
Job training	50%	89%
Job search	73%	69%
Visitation	40%	57%
Peer support and parenting skills	90%	100%
Child support	80%	62%
Transportation	76%	77%
Housing	92%	32%
Drug/alcohol	8%	50%
Felony or misdemeanor	64%	—
Accompanied to court	—	39%
Informal counseling	—	89%
Food	—	75%
Cash assistance	—	7%

The case manager lost track of many POP participants; there was frequently no way to determine whether fathers who were referred for various services actually appeared for help or pursued them with some measure of commitment. As the facilitator of the peer support sessions, the case manager was best able to keep track of participation in peer support. His records show that of the 28 individuals referred to this service, 18 percent never started, 39 percent attended at least one session but stopped, 21 percent attended on an intermittent basis and 14 percent were regularly attending as of the time this report was prepared. Combining those who attended peer support regularly with those who attended intermittently, it appears that about 10 of the 28 (35%) referred to peer support participated actively.

The information is even sparser on client participation patterns for other types of project referrals. For example, for the 10 individuals with education referrals and known outcome information, three never started and six started and quit. Only one individual who started a GED program as a result

of POP pursued the program and was enrolled at the time of report writing. With respect to the 15 referred to an employment training program, six never started (40%), eight started and quit (53%) and only two individuals (7%) completed it. With respect to the 18 referred for job search assistance, eight got a job (44%), six did not (33%), and the remaining 4 were either disabled or otherwise unsuitable for employment. Finally, only 11 participants of the 28 referred to the child support agency followed through and sought any child support actions as a result of their participation in POP: two had their child support payment abated for 90 days, four had their orders modified to better reflect their ability to pay, two had their arrearages reduced, two established a child support order, and one requested blood tests to determine his paternity status. Seventeen participants (61%) did not pursue referrals to the child support agency and did not attempt to meet with a child support technician to discuss their situation. Table 4 presents participation patterns for those referred for various types of services.

TABLE 4. PARTICIPATION PATTERNS FOR POP PARTICIPANTS REFERRED FOR VARIOUS TYPES OF SERVICES

Referred for Education (N= 10)	
Never started	30%
Started but quit	60%
In progress	10%
Referred for Employment Training (N= 15)	
Never started	40%
Started but quit	53%
Completed	7%
Referred for Job Placement Assistance (N= 18)	
Disabled, unable to work	22%
Didn't get a job	33%
Got a job	44%
Peer Support (N= 28)	
Never started	18%
Started but quit	39%
Attends intermittently	21%
Attends regularly	14%
Other	7%

TABLE 4. PARTICIPATION PATTERNS FOR POP PARTICIPANTS REFERRED FOR VARIOUS TYPES OF SERVICES

Child Support (N=28)	
Blood testing requested	4%
Child support order established	7%
Child support order modified	14%
Arrearage reduced	7%
Child support abated for 90 days	7%
No child support action taken	10%
Did not follow through with referral and no child support action taken	61%

According to the POP case manager, at the time of report writing, ten individuals who had entered and participated in the POP project continued to be involved on some level and had an active case status. Another eight individuals were occasionally involved and either attended peer support group meetings on an intermittent basis or contacted the case manager for assistance and advice. The case manager had lost contact with the remaining 10 participants (35%). The project status for these individuals was judged to be inactive. As previously noted, 14 individuals never appeared for a case intake and dropped out before any type of participation. No case status determination could be made for another 5 individuals (see Table 5).

TABLE 5. DISPOSITION OF CASES RECRUITED FOR PARTICIPATION IN POP

	%	(N)
Never showed up for project intake	30	(14)
Participated on some level but no contact with POP at report writing	21	(10)
Participated occasionally and were in contact with POP at report writing	17	(8)
Active POP participants at report writing	21	(10)
No information on disposition	11	(5)
N=		(47)

PROJECT OUTCOMES: EMPLOYMENT AND CHILD SUPPORT

It was hoped that POP would have a positive impact on two outcomes of key interest: employment and child support payments. Since the time line for the evaluation was too short to obtain an objective assessment of employment status using Colorado Unemployment Insurance Wage Reports, we relied on the case manager's assessment to gauge the employment status of participants as of report writing. The case manager was able to supply this information for 23 of the individuals who participated more fully in POP and with whom he retained some contact. Based upon his report, 57 percent of POP participants were unemployed and 43 percent were working as of October 1998. Comparing the employment status of these 23 participants when they joined the project and when we collected information for the final report, we find significant relationships between the two. Eighty percent of the individuals who were employed when they began POP were employed at the follow-up data collection time point. In a similar vein, 74 percent of those who began the project without employment remained unemployed when we collected our follow-up assessment data. Only 26 percent moved from an unemployed to an employed state in the course of participating in POP, while 20 percent of the five employed participants lost their job and ended the project classified as unemployed. Thus, there is little evidence that project participation played a significant role in moving unemployed participants into employment (see Table 6).

TABLE 6. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS' PRE- AND POST-PROGRAM EMPLOYMENT STATUS

	PRE-PROGRAM EMPLOYMENT STATUS	
	EMPLOYED	UNEMPLOYED
Post-Program Employment Status		
Unemployed	20%	74%
Employed	80%	26%
Number of Participants	(5)	(19)

There was also no evidence that project participation led to better patterns of child support payment (see Table 7). In reaching this conclusion, we analyzed payment patterns for 43 individuals who were enrolled in POP as of October 1998. We eliminated 12 individuals from our child support analysis because they were either unknown to the child support agency (N=10) or lacked a formal order requiring them to pay support (N=2).

On average, the 31 POP participants who had active child support cases (among the 43 enrolled in POP before we began to collect child support data) had accumulated an average debt of \$14,999, a monthly support order of \$315, and a monthly debt payment of \$145. Debt levels ranged from zero to \$87,318. At the end of the project, these 31 had an average debt of \$17,267, a monthly support order of \$219, and a debt payment of \$194. The reduction in monthly support may reflect adjustments in orders accorded to participants. For the six months prior to entering POP, these 31 paid 17 percent of the amount they owed. This includes monthly payments as well as IRA intercepts. During the six months following their entry to the POP project, the same 31 participants paid 24 percent of the amount they owed. This increase in payment was not statistically significant or different than what would be expected on the basis of chance alone.

As previously noted, many POP participants were in the program only briefly. Indeed, the 43 enrolled in the program by October 1998 were in POP for an average of 2.9 months; 30 percent had been in the program for less than one month and had disappeared after their first encounter with the case manager.

To determine whether more committed participants evidenced improved patterns of child support payment, we repeated the analysis of payments before and after enrollment in POP, but restricted it to the 17 participants who were in the program for three months or longer. Six of the 17 were not known to the child support agency and did not have an active child support case or an enforceable order. Thus, our analysis was restricted to the eleven participants with a legal child support order who had been in the program for at least three months.

Compared to the full roster of POP participants, those who attended program events for a longer period of time (the average being 6.1 months) had somewhat lower debt levels and monthly payment obligations. On average, they entered the program owing \$11,535 in back due child support (the range being \$800 to \$30,000), with a monthly support order of \$182 and a required debt payment of \$106. When we collected follow-up data, six months following their enrollment in POP, their debt level had increased to \$15,039, but their monthly child support and monthly debt orders increased only slightly to \$193 and \$115, respectively.

During the six months before their enrollment in POP, these eleven paid 31 percent of the child support they owed. In the six months following their enrollment, they paid 37 percent of what they owed. As with the full sample of POP participants, these differences were not statistically significant. All pre- and post-enrollment calculations include payments from all sources, including IRS tax

intercepts, UCB attachments and regular monthly wage assignments. These patterns are summarized in Table 7.

TABLE 7. CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENT PATTERNS SIX MONTHS PRIOR TO AND FOLLOWING ENROLLMENT IN POP

	FULL SAMPLE	THOSE IN POP FOR 3+ MONTHS
Total number	43	17
Number with enforceable child support orders	31	11
Child support characteristics at enrollment		
Average debt	\$14,999	\$11,535
Average monthly order	\$315	\$182
Average monthly debt payment	\$145	\$106
Child support characteristics 6 months following enrollment		
Average debt	\$17,267	\$15,039
Average monthly order	\$219	\$193
Average monthly debt payment	\$194	\$115
Payment as a percent of amount due		
6 months prior to enrollment	17%*	31%*
6 months following enrollment	24%*	37%*

*Differences in pre- and post-program payment are not statistically significant.

It is unclear why 12 of the 43 in the full sample of POP participants (and 6 of the 17 in the tenured sample) were unknown to the child support agency and/or lacked a legal order to pay support. A few may never have had a child on welfare. For example, in some cases, the custodial parent was too young to obtain welfare on her own. Still others had managed to evade detection by the child support agency and continued to remain invisible to the system. Naturally, if we impute to these individuals the average order and debt levels for their counterparts in the program, payment performance for POP participants would decline considerably.

PARTICIPANT REACTIONS

Although POP did not have a significant impact on the employment and child support payment behavior of most participants, it dramatically changed the lives of some participants and their families. The following describes three participants and how POP affected them.

Lawrence is a male Hispanic with less than a high school education. He has two boys ages 4 and 2 that he began seeing on a regular basis while in POP, and thanks to the POP program, he is in the process of obtaining custody of both of his children. When Lawrence first came to the POP program, he was suicidal, abusing alcohol, and having problems with the child support office. The POP case manager helped him find a painting job making \$9-10/hour and he has kept this job and is working full time. The POP program also helped Lawrence turn his life around by providing one-on-one counseling for his alcohol problem, job referrals, and help negotiating his child support obligations. Finally, POP helped Lawrence find suitable housing and now Lawrence has a nice apartment and is obtaining custody of his children.

Jesus is also a Hispanic male with less than a high school education. He has one 5 year old girl whom he sees about once or twice a month. When Jesus came to POP he did not have a job. Through referrals provided by the POP case manager, Jesus obtained a job as a painter. POP helped Jesus with schooling, job placement, and peer support. POP also paid for an attorney for Jesus and he now has joint custody of his child and voluntarily pays his child support.

Brian is an African-American male with a high school diploma. Brian was motivated by the POP program and took advantage of all that the program had to offer. Brian came to POP with a job, but was looking for something better. He is currently training to be a Denver police officer, and has also passed the test to work at the post office.

In a focus group conducted with 12 fathers who had been involved with POP anywhere from its inception about a year ago to as recently and briefly as one week prior to the focus group, the men explained the value of POP and how it had affected their lives. Although most had approached the program with skepticism, believing that it would be “a stupid government thing,” their cynicism quickly dissolved as they interacted with one another, the case manager, the guest speakers, and service personnel affiliated with POP. In their view, POP is sorely needed and more fathers would use it if they knew about it. They suggest that information about POP be included with the first notice of financial responsibility that a father gets from the child support agency and that the agency launch an aggressive public relations campaign to make POP more visible to non-custodial parents.

One aspect of POP that is widely appreciated is the opportunity to get legal and child support questions answered. POP participants agree that child support technicians are frequently

inaccessible and unwilling to answer the many questions that fathers have. For example, one participant recalled the value of hearing a presentation on child support by the POP coordinator at a correctional facility:

I was sitting in the room with more than 30 other guys and there were so many questions he couldn't even answer all of them. Social Services is not at all cooperative. You can't talk to the worker, it's hard to even catch the worker. . . .POP is a way to get to people who can give you answers, people who can cut through the red tape.

Another appreciated group session was a presentation by a domestic relations attorney. Participants have many questions about blood testing, custody, and visitation rights. They found a presentation on the legal rights of non-custodial parents to be very useful and would welcome more access to lawyers and legal information.

Still another appreciated feature of POP is the possibility of working with a child support technician to generate more responsive orders. For example, one father reported that he was working with a "good technician" who had reduced his monthly payments to a manageable level and that this adjustment was helping him "get on his feet." POP participants feel that high orders, back due support for children they sometimes don't know about, and rigid collection policies drive some fathers underground. As one father put it:

The deadbeat dad is deadbeat because they are beat down. I bring home \$1,500 a month and they say I owe \$1,650 a month.

For those who have spent years "blowing everybody off," and "jumping jobs" as soon as they were found by the child support agency, it is not immediately apparent who to turn to when they decide to cooperate. POP is viewed by these fathers as a safe place to identify options and work things out.

POP is the first outlet I found to give the deadbeat dads another way of looking at themselves. I want to do the right thing. There's just nothing out there. I can't find work with my prison record. The feds just squeeze and squeeze but they do nothing to help the dads who maybe want to traverse that maze.

Despite the interest fathers expressed in modifying child support orders in a formal sense, many were unsure whether the program will lead fathers to pay more child support through the formal system. Some say that they are helping out informally and prefer to continue that way. They maintain that it shouldn't matter whether payments are made formally or informally as long as the baby is taken care of. For these fathers, "the bottom line is paying."

I just throw her money when I have it. Me and the baby's mom just made that deal. I thought she would be better off. I'm paying a little bit more than I probably would through child support but that's okay, I want my baby to have things. I don't want more government in my life. I told the baby's mom, "I'm helping and you're not going on welfare."

Others warn that informal payment arrangements can backfire and that fathers need the protections of a legal support order. As one older father explained:

Some people can be nice now, but that doesn't mean it will be that way in 10 years. Things change. It needs to be legal to protect you. I thought I could do it informally with my son's mom, but she got greedy. Now she's like, you're not seeing him unless you pay me this much. I keep receipts now, I keep every receipt. My son's mom is greedy.

The POP case manager is clearly appreciated for being trustworthy and supportive. One participant described him as "the first person to let me know that there are solutions." He is praised for his informal counseling where he "talks about staying clean. . .and building up the family." He also earns high marks for helping fathers get more visitation and going to court with them. As one father explained the importance of having the case manager at a sentencing hearing:

He's there for us in court and that's really nice. He's a good speaker. . . .It proves a lot to the judge when someone cares enough to be there with you. It looks like you have people to care, family and friends to help.

Still others value the parenting information they get at peer support group meetings. Fathers said it was useful to learn how to raise their children and figure out to do "fun stuff." They appreciated having a place to "vent," and to "talk to somebody who knows." They jokingly note that it is helpful to "sometimes hear that other people have it even worse." As one father explained:

I'm not here for employment. I'm here for the classes. I want to learn to raise my daughter without being, you know, "no, no, no." I want to be patient. My parole officer says I need to learn anger control. I don't want to be the kind of parent I had and neither does her mom. . . .I want to know how to discipline without just whuppin' on her.

Finally, although most of the fathers at the focus group said they didn't have problems with employment, some said that they did come to POP for help with employment and appreciated the leads they had received from the case manager and the counselors at the Employment Division. This is especially true for fathers who have a felony background and face many barriers to employment:

Employment was definitely important. I was looking for a job, just coming out of prison. The case manager gave me the hope that there are jobs out there. Somebody has to hire

you if you're going to pay support. Being in this program lets people know you want to do the right thing.

This program is really the only hope I have. I've been everywhere and nobody has helped. . . .Nobody wants you with a prison record. My application looks so bad, I don't ever know what to do. The case manager says he also has some money for shoes or clothes if you need that to do an interview or start work. Things like that, it's got a lot of value for me. . . .I've been kinda' lost.

Asked to assess the impact of the program on participants, most fathers stress the way it has helped them to parent, visit with their children and feel hopeful about the future.

The outcome of what POP has done for me is that I can pick up my daughter and spend time with her. Without it, I probably wouldn't be seeing my daughter as much. My baby's grandmother and my parole officer, they are all willing to have me see her because they know I'm doing these classes and I'm getting good money.

The focus group did not incorporate the reactions of those who began POP but dropped out. A review of program files for these individuals reveals that some are extremely unstable and have many dysfunctions and problems, including substance abuse. Still others are characterized by the case manager as "lazy," "spoiled," and/or uncommitted to changing their lives. For many, we lack the information to even begin to understand why they lost contact with the case manager and dropped out of POP. The following are brief descriptions of a few POP drop-outs and the interventions they experienced while they were in the program.

Richard attended one peer support group meeting but never showed up again. The case manager provided bus tokens and a variety of referrals.

Wade only attended one peer support group meeting. The case manager helped him get food from a food bank and set up an appointment for him with a child support technician but Wade never followed through.

James kept in contact with the case manager but never attended a peer support group meeting or went to GED classes. He received referrals for employment, schooling, a food bank, and child support negotiations. The case manager accompanied James to a court hearing as a show of support, but afterwards, James dropped out of sight. According to ACSES, the only child support James contributed was an intercept of his unemployment compensation benefits.

Patricia attended a few peer support group meetings and received referrals for employment, a food bank, and a negotiation with a child support technician before she dropped out. The case manager also gave her bus tokens and paid her dry cleaning bill so that she would have clean clothes for a job interview..

Anthony attended two peer support group meetings and received referrals for employment, child support negotiations and schooling before dropping out. He also received bus tokens. Anthony has a substance abuse problem and never pursued any referrals.

Joseph attended peer support group meetings for several months. He received referrals for employment, mediation, food bank assistance, and bus tokens. The case manager also helped to drive him around town. He never showed up for a scheduled job interview and stopped coming to peer support group meetings when the case manager told him he could not show up intoxicated or high on drugs. Joseph never admitted he had a substance abuse problem.

Leon attended a few peer support group sessions and received referrals for employment, schooling, and child support negotiations before he stopped coming. He was also given bus tokens and the case manager accompanied him to a court hearing. According to the case manager, he never followed through with any referrals.

Clearly, attrition is a significant problem in fatherhood programs. Architects of future programs and evaluators will have to keep this in mind and try to develop more aggressive methods of tracking client participation and outcomes at very frequent intervals. In the absence of these accountability procedures, many participants disappear and their circumstances are unknown.

STAFF REACTIONS

Program architects, staff, child support personnel and employment coordinators agree that there is a need for a program like POP even though they are disappointed that it has not produced more demonstrable results. The following describes the reactions of different audiences to POP and their recommendations for program improvements.

The child support agency feels it is useful to have a program like POP for “public relations” and “equity reasons” alone. Although the director does not believe that there will be a big demand for POP, unless the program is effectively mandated, he believes that it should be in the agency’s “arsenal” of responses. He likened the availability of POP to the availability of contempt and other less frequently invoked remedies. Both are useful even if they are rarely used. He believes that the POP program will help the agency cultivate better relationships with non-custodial parents.

The director also regards POP and other fatherhood initiatives as more compatible with new federal goals which stress broader payment patterns. Under existing federal incentives, agencies are rated on the amount of payments they generate. In the new federal scheme, agencies will also receive

credit for eliciting even modest payments in many cases including those that only involve the payment of arrearages. To the extent that fatherhood programs motivate non-custodial parents to pay some child support, they will be helpful to child support agencies in meeting their goals. As this director described the change in incentives:

Our current reward system is about money and the Paternity Establishment Percentage (PEP). The new incentives are PEP, the percent of cases under order, the percent of the monthly support order that is payed and the percent of arrears cases that are paying. This means that getting everyone paying something counts. And that is compatible with fatherhood outreach efforts.

This agency administrator recommends that programs like POP try to recruit from “every possible angle.” This would include referrals from child support technicians, community-based agencies, the courts and the hospitals. Given the low level of referrals, he would be unwilling to dedicate staff for case management. However, over time, if case volume picks up, he is prepared to make this type of commitment. In the interim, he has the luxury of learning more about responsible fatherhood interventions like POP through a federally-funded demonstration project which aims to enhance the employment and child support paying behavior of incarcerated parents following their release from prison.

While Denver’s director of child support is reluctant to hire a case manager for POP-like interventions, he is interested in supporting an ombudsman to serve as a liaison to non-custodial parents and troubleshoot cases that need special attention. At this time, he does not think that the ombudsman needs to handle cases, but rather work as an intermediary between child support technicians and the outside world.

The child support supervisor who served as the agency’s liaison to POP in an ombudsman-type capacity is less certain that this two-tier process is satisfactory. Although she feels that she was able to convince technicians to make needed adjustments in most POP cases, she acknowledges that child support workers are “territorial” about their cases and are generally reluctant to make changes that might compromise their collection goals. She sees great value in having a worker handle POP cases who is sympathetic to the program’s philosophy and will not be held accountable to strict collection goals.

We probably need a specialized worker to handle these cases. Regular technicians are geared toward collecting money and not to giving guys a break...Their attitude is, 'he has never paid, he never came forward, why are we giving him a break?' We need people with

a different philosophy. People who are not held to the same goals. It is a very aggressive collection atmosphere around here.

She also feels there is a need to staff POP interactions with workers who have enhanced customer service skills. In her experience, POP participants are typically ill-informed about their child support situation. She feels that they would welcome a courteous, personal interaction with a child support technician:

Most of the guys I spoke with were hungry for information. They didn't understand the first thing about child support...They are walking around blind. They appreciated someone sitting down with them and explaining their case and their options.

At the same time, even if non-custodial parents get to see a sympathetic child support technician who is more responsive and "cuts them deals," this supervisor is doubtful that the project will make much of a difference in payment patterns. Many of the POP participants she was scheduled to see never showed up. Others had major problems with unmanageable arrearage levels, sometimes in excess of \$50,000. Still others struck her as guys who viewed the program "as another way to weasel out of paying." For these reasons, she places greater hope in interventions with young fathers who have not amassed huge debts and are not as adept at "gaming the system." It is her hope that POP-type interventions can help to make young fathers responsible at age 16, well before they have had several children and developed big support obligations, access and visitation issues, substance abuse problems and a criminal history.

The employment coordinator, on the other hand, had just the opposite reaction to the age group most receptive to POP. In her experience, older fathers were more apt than young ones to return to the Employment Division for assistance with jobs. The case manager echoed this when he observed:

Older guys are easier to work with. They've messed up and they want to straighten up. The young ones, you go out of your way to help, and then they go and still mess up. The older ones are more responsible.

Most POP participants used the services of the Employment Division in a very limited manner, only stopping by for employment leads. They rarely took advantage of the job readiness classes that the Division offered dealing with interviewing skills, applications, references, and resume writing. Nor did they attend the Division's Job Club, which met on a bi-weekly basis, or receive referrals for off-site, career-track training programs. In contrast, TANF clients who use the Employment Division are required to spend 28 hours per week engaged in active job search activities in order to receive

their public assistance grant. They receive extra incentives once they get a job. Finally, they qualify for both case management and supportive services dealing with child care and transportation

The employment coordinator believes that responsible fatherhood programs like POP would be more effective if they had a parallel set of sanctions and incentives for participants. Like the TANF population, poor, non-custodial parents with limited work skills and experience need structure and support to become involved with and stay engaged in remedial programs. As she put it:

POP clients were treated like general walk-ins at our employment center, so they typically came in, got three employment referrals, and left. They needed much more structure and support. They should have set it up with more monitoring and specific attendance requirements. Typically, they came once and didn't come back. I would recommend more structure with more of a TANF-type intervention.

In her view, POP clients were somewhat less motivated than the general population that seeks assistance at the Employment Division. One reason is that they were young, poorly educated and lacked work experience. Another reason is that the Division primarily serves women and many of the men may have been deterred from going to job readiness classes that were overwhelmingly female. Finally, many POP participants had large child support obligations and knew that they would face a wage assignment soon after they became employed. While not unlike the child care expenses that TANF clients confront when they become employed, "Child support takes some of the shine off of getting a new job."

The POP director and case manager would also welcome a stronger system of incentives and sanctions to strengthen the attachment of participants to the program. This might include stipends for participation, paid apprenticeships and more aggressive abatements of child support debt. It may also include fines, reinstatements of child support debt and other legal consequences for failure to comply with the program interventions. As the case manager put it, "You have to have some type of hold on them. It can be positive or negative."

In the absence of economic and legal mechanisms to compel participation, the program relies on the attachments between the case manager and the participant to encourage engagement. Asked how to keep participants motivated, the case manager answers, "By caring for them." He describes the process this way:

You have to make them know you care. That is how you keep them motivated. If they come to a couple of classes in a row, I've got them. It's the ones who don't come in the beginning that are the hardest. So I chase them. I call them up to see how they are doing.

I give them rides to the classes. They need to feel that they are cared for. I tried, but maybe I should have chased them even harder.

Like the participants in the focus group, the case manager sees the value of POP in helping men to be good fathers. Especially in the short term, he sees the program's impact on employment and child support payments to be negligible. Keeping a job, paying child support and behaving in pro-social ways takes many life skills and attitudes that POP participants lack. The POP case manager sees himself as a positive role model and a symbol of what they can become. Since "being around positive people and wanting to change" were the key ingredients in his own evolution, these are the elements that he tries to recreate in POP. Learning life skills is a slow process and he is under no illusion that fathers will quickly drop long-standing patterns and behaviors and become responsible parents, employees and payers.

CONCLUSIONS

POP, Colorado's first publicly supported, responsible fatherhood initiative, reveals the difficulties in targeting, recruiting and serving poor, non-custodial parents who are behind in their child support payment and in need of assistance with employment, parenting and access and visitation. Program architects face many challenges in locating and assisting this troubled and often elusive population even after they secure funding and a mix of public and community-based organizations to provide an array of needed services. Like TANF recipients, their female counterparts, poor, non-custodial parents typically lack the education, work skills and employment history needed to succeed in the workplace, even in a good economy. More often than not, their educational and employment problems are compounded with substance abuse issues, transportation limitations, and a criminal history. They lack the confidence and self esteem needed to try to change in pro-social ways. Not surprisingly, many have unrealistic expectations about their capacities and are impatient with the slow path they face on the long road to self-sufficiency in the legitimate world. As in other areas of their life, their inconstancy shows up in programs like POP, and many have only fleeting interactions with the case manager or avail themselves of only a limited number of services before they disappear.

While there is a good deal of debate on the pros and cons of mandatory versus voluntary interventions with non-custodial parents, POP reveals some of the limitations of a voluntary approach, particularly one that is coupled with a loose program structure. Without a strong system of sanctions and incentives, many participants made only limited commitment to the program and exited before they experienced big life changes. Of course, it is hard to come up with an attractive

system of “carrots and sticks” for non-custodial parents. Unlike custodial parents, non-custodial parents do not have access to TANF, food stamps, Medicaid, subsidized housing and other support services. More to the point, it appears that the one tangible financial incentive, flexibility by the child support agency and some relief of current and/or past due child support, may not be sufficient to sustain commitment to POP and the many pro-social behaviors it espouses. Many non-custodial parents have engaged in many years of nonpayment and owe substantial sums of money to the child support agency. Mild forms of child support relief may not be too appealing. In some cases, project participation may actually result in higher debt levels and monthly obligations, especially when technicians begin to review neglected cases, calculate interest charges, and engage in other case-cleaning activities. It is recommended that child support agencies consider adopting some adjustments that are more likely to be appealing to and effective with an extremely debt-ridden and habitually non-compliant population.

It is also recommended that future programs offer a fuller array of employment services than the limited assistance with job seeking offered in POP. Supported work and apprenticeship opportunities may be of particular value since they combine the objectives of quick income with skill building. It is possible that this combination of training and employment will appeal to POP parents and can be used to help cement the commitment of individuals to the program and its goals. This type of programming may become more common with the award of welfare-to-work grants by the Department of Labor to be used in conjunction with responsible fatherhood projects.

A third recommendation is that future programs experiment with home visits and other more aggressive outreach efforts to elicit and sustain participation. Home visits were used at the few PFS sites that produced positive effects on child support payments. Extremely disadvantaged populations like the ones handled in POP often need more extensive outreach than is normally accorded to clients in remedial programs. This includes, but is not limited to, home visits, pick-up and drop-off transportation services, and reminder calls before scheduled peer support classes and other appointments and hearings. Naturally, these strategies require special forms of staff commitment and zeal since they go well beyond the confines of what is normally considered to be case management. Hiring this type of staff is yet another challenge in operating an effective program.

POP participants did not become employed as a result of their participation in the project. Nor did they evidence better child support payment patterns, at least in the six months following their entry to POP. Given the scale of missing information on most participants, it is hard to tie project outcomes to specific participation patterns. But even if we limit the review of employment and child

support outcomes to those who appeared to be in the program for at least three months, we fail to find evidence of post-program improvement in the areas of employment and child support payment. These outcomes are clearly hard to achieve, especially in a short time frame. They are consistent with results reported in Parents' Fair Share, a much larger, longer and more ambitious demonstration project.

Unfortunately, we lacked any systematic measure of changes in parenting skill and access and visitation. This is most regrettable since these are the areas that the case manager focused on most heavily. They are also the areas of greatest impact reported by the participants who took part in a focus group aimed at discussing project outcomes. In weekly peer group classes, the case manager says he tried to help fathers to "be there for their children." Clearly there is a longer time line for realizing the benefits of improved parenting, access and visitation. However, these are areas of impact that promise to have the most lasting benefits for poor families and are certainly among the key goals of the project.

POP has taught us that serving and evaluating remedial interventions for poor, non-custodial parents is more difficult than we had anticipated. Fortunately, Colorado will have a chance to incorporate the lessons of POP into other publicly-funded fatherhood programs for low-income families. Among the programs underway are the OCSE-funded responsible fatherhood initiatives in El Paso and Denver County, the latter of which focuses on formerly incarcerated fathers. We look forward to seeing whether these programs better succeed at serving poor non-custodial parents with many barriers to employment.

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