A Father-Friendliness Survey:
How Do Community Organizations Report Engaging Fathers?

Kyle Miller[1] and Jordan A. Arellanes[2]
[1]School of Teaching and Learning, College of Education, Illinois State University
[2]Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences, Illinois State University

ABSTRACT

This community-based project explored levels of father-friendliness across local organizations, agencies, and schools. A community coalition of individuals from diverse backgrounds and roles created a community survey to gather quantitative and qualitative information from individuals who worked with children or families. An analysis of survey responses (N=122) led to descriptive and thematic results of how the community served or marginalized fathers. Results were used to guide efforts in father engagement across various professional sectors.

   Keywords: community-based research, father engagement, mixed-methods research, community survey, families, community change

There are a growing number of services and supports for families and parents in the United States, and they are typically marketed as such—for *families* and *parents* (Guarin & Meyer, 2018; Posey-Maddox, 2017). However, the unspoken reality is that most of these services and supports are geared toward mothers, leaving fewer opportunities for fathers to receive the care and support they need to thrive as parents (de Montigny et al., 2017; Lechowicz et al., 2019; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). To address this inequity, a community-based coalition was created to better understand how organizations, agencies, and schools could better engage and support local fathers. This article shares findings from the research produced by this community-based coalition which was designed to better understand how local services supported fathers.

   The McLean County Fatherhood Coalition was created in 2018 by a nonprofit organization that serves families and children in a small, corporate-oriented Midwest city. In the early stages, the organization invited a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., community programs, nonprofit agencies, early childhood services, K-12 school districts, universities, faith communities, local residents) to gather and identify ways to support fathers and their engagement with children better. The current study emerged as a result of a previous project consisting of two years of interviews and focus groups with fathers (Miller et al., 2020). After analyzing fathers' perspectives, the coalition decided to create a community survey to learn about father engagement from the perspective of organizations and programs that serve families. We aimed to answer two guiding questions: 1) How do local community and school professionals report the levels of father-friendliness within their organizations?, and 2) In what ways do organizations and schools report supporting or neglecting fathers? Ultimately, findings from the survey would help guide the coalition's efforts in identifying the areas of our community in need of support and those who could share their strengths related to father engagement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

   Fathers play a unique and vital role in children's lives, with the potential to boost

children's social, emotional, and academic skills (Bergin & Bergin, 2018; Jeynes, 2015). Academically, children receive higher grades and are likelier to graduate from high school when fathers stay involved with their schoolwork (Curtis et al., 2017; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; McWayne et al., 2013). Socially and emotionally, children show lower rates of aggression, delinquency, and anxiety, and higher rates of self-esteem, when a father is positively engaged (Allen & Daly, 2007; Piskernik & Ahnert, 2019; Sanders et al., 2014; Verschueren, 2020). Research also shows that fathers can provide unique contributions beyond what a child might experience with their mothers. Fathers can promote more exploration (Newland et al., 2011) and language development beyond what mothers contribute (Conica et al., 2020) and can serve as a buffer from maternal abuse and neglect (Dubowitz et al., 2000). Additionally, for children experiencing adversity in their lives, fathers can serve as an important protective factor to keep a child resilient (Bergin & Bergin, 2018; Field, 1998). Therefore, to care about children means one must also care about their fathers, as child outcomes are associated with a father's engagement.

Marginalization of Fathers

The roles and expectations of fatherhood have evolved over the past few decades, with many describing "modern fathers" as more actively engaged and emotionally attached to children than previous generations (Carrillo et al., 2016; Påfs et al., 2016). The traditional or stereotypical view of fathers as *providers* and *protectors* is no longer an appropriate description of how fathers engage with children or their desires to be involved (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). Fathers spend significantly more time with their children than 30 years ago and are just as likely as mothers to report parenting as central to their identity (Livingston & Parker, 2019). However, in most cases, fathers' involvement with caregiving and family programming is still a fraction of what mothers contribute (Holmberg & Olds, 2015; Wall & Arnold,

2007). There is no simple answer to why this occurs, but it can be partially explained by the policies and practices surrounding families and children's development.

While fatherhood has evolved, adjacent institutions and programs that serve families have not evolved in ways that recognize these changes (Brooks & Hodkinson, 2020; Gill et al., 2021). The policies and practices of most community programs and services are still mother-aligned, with few focusing on fathers or the father-child dyad (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). In fact, many community programs and services have reputations for avoiding fathers in their work with families and instead consciously focusing on mothers and their children (Amato, 2018). Therefore, although programs and policies have adopted gender-inclusive language, such as "parent" or "family," their services are typically not as inclusive as implied.

Whether the marginalization of fathers is a conscious or unconscious act, decades of research suggest that fathers are largely overlooked in the design and delivery of services (Guterman et al., 2018; Lundahl et al., 2008). Fathers are likely to feel isolated and unsupported without being purposefully included in the parenting and family network of services and activities (Brooks & Hodkinson, 2020). The exclusion and isolation of fathers have been found in both online and in-person parenting communities as gendered mindsets and practices serve as barriers to father engagement (Lee, 2023). Unless fathers become more central to the work of educators and service providers, they will miss out on the social relationships and resources that exist in community agencies and schools surrounding the child.

There is also a notable lack of focus on fathers in scholarship (Kim, 2018). Research studies are often categorized as *family* and *parenting* studies, even when the sample consists purely or primarily of mothers. In turn, data on mothers typically guide the development and refinement of programs and policies in the field—as mothers are more heavily represented in research (Leach et al.,

2019; Lundahl et al., 2008). We simply know less about fathers' paternal experiences, behaviors, and needs (Arellanes et al., 2022; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Leach et al., 2019).

Panter-Brick and colleagues (2014) write, "Engaging with fathers is one of the least well-explored and articulated aspects of parenting interventions" (p.1187). In fact, one of the most widely used evidence-based models in social services, home visitation, is anchored in research that almost exclusively focuses on the mother-child dyad (Lee et al., 2016; Olds, 2002). However, a small proportion of research that does include fathers has shown that fathers can be effectively served by family programs when the content is father-focused (Caldwell et al., 2010; Cowan et al., 2009; Guterman, 2018), showing that fathers can be engaged when they are purposefully included in the work of an organization.

Our Community Approach

The work of the McLean County Fatherhood Coalition is rooted in community-based change and therefore required a collaborative commitment from various sectors in the community to identify and prioritize the needs of fathers. Their belief is that by sharing resources and collaborating, the community as a whole benefits. For example, little change might come from one organization updating their intake forms to include father information and input. However, a greater change could come from all family-oriented programs and institutions by identifying ways to support fathers further—whether it manifests as businesses making changing tables available in male restrooms or schools including fathers in all communication with families. Cultivating a shared interest and commitment to fathers could develop and disseminate relevant, culturally-congruent support (Caldwell et al., 2010; Letiecq et al., 2022). It could also create positive peer pressure to view fathers through a strength-based approach and examine communities' strengths and limitations with an eye toward change (Perry, 2011).

The unique dynamics of the group allowed us to adopt principles of community-based research where we aimed to engage in research *with*, *by,* and *for* fathers (Hacker, 2013; Letiecq et al., 2022); in applying these principles, community-based research and change are never "complete," and there is no predetermined endpoint. Instead, one project leads into the next to stay relevant in the community and position the coalition as responsive to the changing needs of fathers and families (Hacker, 2013). With a university researcher as one of the group's original members, there was already an internal capacity to move forward with a research project and an organic commitment to the group's mission (Wallerstein et al., 2018). The coalition saw the value in disseminating their work to a broader audience to help fellow scholars, practitioners, educators, and community partners support the role of fatherhood in the community. Thus, research initiatives, including the current study, became paramount in the foundations of the McLean County Fatherhood Coalition.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The diverse configuration of the fatherhood coalition, which included various roles and sectors of the community, naturally led us to consider parenting and father engagement as an ecological process. This collective belief aligns with the work of Bronfenbrenner (2005) and subsequent ecological scholars (i.e., Cabrera, 2014), who suggest that various environmental influences, directly and indirectly, intersect with children's development. Therefore, we utilized Bronfenbrenner's theoretical perspective in the study's design (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Bronfenbrenner called attention to a developing child's immediate environment, labeled as the microsystem, as well as other proximal and remote influences (i.e., mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem). This perspective positioned the coalition to view fathers as holding a meaningful role within the child's daily life while

41

simultaneously acknowledging that relationships with other caregivers, employment status, surrounding economy, legal system, media, societal norms, and historical time points can shape a father's role and engagement.

In previous studies with this coalition (Miller et al., 2020; 2022), we investigated these various systems through the eyes of fathers. In this study, we focus on the community surrounding the father and child. We specifically targeted organizations and programs within the community that serve families and children (i.e., the microsystem), as well as relationships existing within the community (i.e., the mesosystem), such as a father's relationship with a child's school. More broadly, we considered how societal structures impact how local organizations provide programming and resources to families at the exo- and macro-levels as we organized and interpreted data.

METHODS

The design of this study is rooted in the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) as described above (Hacker, 2013; Lantz et al., 2001). The goal was to make the research process a co-learning and capacity-building endeavor to attend to fathers' many social inequities in the local community and beyond (Lee et al., 2016). Collaborative efforts began with the development of our research questions: 1) How do local community and school professionals report the levels of father-friendliness within their organizations? and 2) In what ways do organizations and schools report supporting or neglecting fathers? The coalition believed these questions would help us identify areas of weakness in our community that we could continue to support, as well as efforts that could serve as models or guides for other programs and organizations.

A concurrent mixed-methods research design was utilized in the current study. This intramethod is situated for the simultaneous collection of numeric and written data (quantitative and qualitative) for the blending of results (Ivankova, 2015). This design allowed for more complete explorations of how fathers were supported or marginalized in the community. As community-based projects are rarely a linear process, while we intended to begin with quantitative results and then use the qualitative results to interpret the numeric data, it became much more cyclical as we integrated each method into the other. Hacker (2013) suggests that community-based research requires more flexibility than traditional research, as a range of individuals from various backgrounds are involved in the methodological decision-making along the way, which is what we experienced.

Data Sources

After determining our research questions and design, we moved on to the development of a research instrument to collect the data. The coalition used the Father-Friendly Check-Up survey (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2016) as a starting point. The tool was developed for organizations to assess how much they encouraged or discouraged father involvement in programming and activities. The survey contains over 80 Likert-scale questions, from which 25 were selected for the coalition to consider. The coalition members collaboratively reviewed the questions. Eventually, they selected eight questions they believed were the most relevant given the scope of our work and the recognition of participant burnout (see Table 1). Each question also included open-ended comment boxes to prompt participants to explain or expand upon their quantitative responses. Additionally, participants were asked to provide general guidance and ideas for the coalition, followed by questions about their positions and organizations. Approval for data collection was gained through the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and senior leadership at one of the primary community agencies.

Participants

The survey aimed to gather information from a wide range of individuals

that serve within the community; therefore, coalition members created a spreadsheet of names and organizations whose work intersected with families and children. The distribution list consisted of over 500 recipients from a range of sectors (i.e., social services, family services, early intervention, K-12 schools, community health, nonprofit organizations, first responders, government agencies, and faith communities). The electronic survey was sent to each recipient in March 2022.

For the 122 participants who completed the entire survey, 28 (23%) identified as service providers, 24 (19.7%) as educators, 37 (30.3%) as administrators, and 33 (27.0%) as other (e.g., community engagement, health specialist, funder, board member, pastor). Across this group, a diverse range of sectors was represented: social services 28 (23.0%), early childhood program/early intervention 11 (9.0%), family services 9 (7.4%), K-12 schools 24 (19.7%), community health 7 (5.7%), nonprofit 17 (13.9%), government agency 8 (6.6%), faith community 8 (6.6%), first responder 2 (1.6%), for-profit 1 (0.8%), other 7 (5.7%).

Analysis

Descriptive statistics of quantitative responses were analyzed using SPSS version 26, specifically the frequencies, mean scores, and standard deviations. This process helped us answer our first research question related to levels of father-friendliness in the community. Our quantitative analysis was kept simple in the spirit of the community-based project so coalition members and the wider community audience could easily interpret and relate to the results with mean scores and percentages (Hacker, 2013).

A qualitative analysis of short-answer responses allowed us to further interpret quantitative responses, as well as answer the second research question related to how the community is supporting or hindering the engagement of fathers within programs and organizations. Following the CBPR approach, our analysis began with the 23 individuals in attendance at the September 2022 meeting.

Coalition members were placed into small groups to review and take notes on emerging ideas and patterns of responses in the short-answer data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Small group and whole group notes from the meeting were saved as memos. This process was repeated at the following meeting, where we revisited the qualitative data in conjunction with the quantitative data to discuss how open-ended responses and the coalition's "clustering" of ideas helped explain the numeric results (Ivankova, 2015).

Next, all qualitative data and memos were uploaded into NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2018) and analyzed through a more formal inductive, thematic process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The first step involved open coding and assigning basic labels to each chunk of data, including all written responses and memos (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Most of these basic labels and ideas were previously identified by coalition members, such as a code about *serving the whole family* (e.g., "all family members," "everyone in the family," "mothers and fathers") and another code related to a *focus on mothers*. Each line of data was coded in consultation with notes and open coding ideas listed by coalition members from the first wave of analysis.

Additional codes were also added during the separate analysis using the NVivo software. For example, during analysis discussions with the whole coalition, coalition members had ignored "N/A" [Not Applicable] responses. However, "N/A" was added as a code during the second wave of analysis, as it still constituted a response from participants and could potentially serve as an indicator of father-friendliness. Next, during the axial coding phase, labels were grouped under common headings and further interrogated for how responses led to a common theme (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For example, codes related to the impact of COVID-19, funding issues, and lack of male applicants were grouped under "barriers to serving fathers."

The coded material was then brought back to the full coalition for review and feedback, and final codes were agreed upon.

43

The identified codes were also used as a platform to revisit the quantitative data and further interpret the descriptive statistics for each survey question (see Table 1). Each stage of analysis and discussion allowed the coalition to piece together our community's larger "story" of father-friendliness with the assistance of our data and its application to coalition members' diverse roles in the community. By reflecting upon and discussing the data through differing positions in the community, we were able to consider the data through an ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) and the various systems operating within the data.

RESULTS

In reference to research question 1, which called for the examination of numeric data, descriptive statistics were generated, and mean scores hovered at moderate levels of father-friendliness. Results signaled slightly more negative reports of planning and reflecting within the organization and slightly more positive reports of recognizing bias and using trauma-informed approaches. Table 1 provides a summary of descriptive statistics.

Table 1

Survey items, frequencies, and means

Survey Item	Frequency (Percentage)		Mean (SD) Strongly agree (1) – Strongly disagree (5)
My program or organization offers father-specific or father-only services.	Strongly agree	23 (18.9%)	2.72 (1.48)
	Somewhat agree	17 (13.9%)	
	Neither agree/disagree	20 (16.4%)	
	Somewhat disagree	27 (22.1%)	
	Strongly disagree	35 (28.7%)	
My program or organization offers services that strengthen fathers' roles as a parent.	Strongly agree	27 (22.1%)	3.34 (1.31)
	Somewhat agree	37 (30.3%)	
	Neither agree/disagree	22 (18.0%)	
	Somewhat disagree	22 (18.0%)	
	Strongly disagree	14 (11.5%)	
My program or organization has implemented specific ways to build the capacity of staff to effectively engage fathers.	Strongly agree	14 (11.5%)	2.57 (1.35)
	Somewhat agree	19 (15.6%)	
	Neither agree/disagree	25 (20.5%)	
	Somewhat disagree	29 (23.8%)	
	Strongly disagree	35 (28.7%)	

My program or organization has conducted an audit/review of policies and procedures to determine the level of father-friendliness and identified changes the organization might need to make.	Strongly agree	5 (4.1%)	2.16 (1.14)
	Somewhat agree	7 (5.7%)	
	Neither agree/disagree	39 (32.0%)	
	Somewhat disagree	22 (18.0%)	
	Strongly disagree	49 (40.2%)	
My program or organization hires male staff to deliver programs or engage with fathers.	Strongly agree	18 (14.8%)	2.98 (1.33)
	Somewhat agree	28(23.0%)	
	Neither agree/disagree	33 (27.0%)	
	Somewhat disagree	19 (15.6%)	
	Strongly disagree	24 (19.7%)	
My program or organization periodically surveys fathers to determine their needs, concerns, and interests related to the organization's or program's activities and services.	Strongly agree	9 (7.4%)	2.38 (1.28)
	Somewhat agree	15 (12.3%)	
	Neither agree/disagree	32 (26.2%)	
	Somewhat disagree	23 (18.9%)	
	Strongly disagree	43 (35.2%)	
My program or organization acknowledges there is systemic bias against fathers and actively challenges this bias through policies and practices.	Strongly agree	13 (10.7%)	2.92 (1.20)
	Somewhat agree	24 (19.7%)	
	Neither agree/disagree	44 (32.0%)	
	Somewhat disagree	22 (18.0%)	
	Strongly disagree	19 (15.6%)	
My program or organization utilizes a trauma-informed approach with fathers.	Strongly agree	24 (19.7%)	3.08 (1.38)
	Somewhat agree	24 (19.7%	
	Neither agree/disagree	35 (28.7%)	
	Somewhat disagree	15 (12.3%)	
	Strongly disagree	24 (19.7%)	

The qualitative findings were then used to expand upon these results by attempting to explain the quantitative scores and respondents' ratings of their programs and organizations. Written comments also allowed us to explore research question 2 by examining perceived barriers and supports in the community. The thematic analysis led to the identification of three primary themes suggesting that participants 1) believe "family" programming is for everyone, including fathers, 2) services are more relevant to mothers, and 3) focusing on fathers can be a goal. These findings help illuminate the ecological nature of family- and father-related programming and services by identifying the

intersection of families and community organizations at the most proximal levels of a child and family's environment, as well as some of the broader, more remote ideologies of what it means to be inclusive and who should be prioritized within families (Bronfenbreneer, 1986; Cabrera et al., 2014). Each theme is described below.

Theme 1: We Are Inclusive

Most participants explained that their program's or organization's services were designed for the whole family or parents in general and, therefore, included fathers. There was an emphasis on serving ALL family members and being inclusive in efforts rather than targeting different roles or individuals within the family system. Comments suggested a macrolevel tone of adopting terms and categories that were broad and popular to use in family programming. This was by far the most robust theme in the data, with common responses such as "We serve men, women, and families of all makeups;" "All policies/procedures are geared toward all family structures;" and "We do not offer services exclusively for fathers but work to engage them in programming we share with all parents." The general message was that there is a one-size-fits-all mentality when engaging family members. Participants explained that they are inclusive and gender-neutral to include any family member in the child's life.

These qualitative findings helped to explain the notable difference in quantitative scores, particularly survey items 1 and 2 (offering father-specific services and offering services that strengthen fathers' role in parenting). Participants rated themselves more favorably in strengthening fathers' roles in parenting, even when they did not offer services specific to fathers. This is likely because they believed their "inclusive programming" could benefit any family member who attended—including fathers. Similarly, responses related to using trauma-informed approaches with fathers and acknowledging bias toward fathers also leaned more positively toward agreement, with the explanation that their programs use these approaches with all individuals (e.g., "We incorporate trauma-informed practices into our program with all parents," "All staff are trauma-informed for every client we serve," "We advocate against biases that all clients face").

Within this theme, participants also noted that while their *family* programs and services are open to fathers, fathers do not often attend or access resources. One participant wrote, "The issue I have seen is fathers are more hesitant to participate than mothers." While other participants shared, "We can't make fathers participate in family activities. We can only invite them;" "We welcome fathers to be part of the program, but it's rare for a father to visit our office;" and "Fathers have opportunities to join PTOs [parent-teacher organizations] or be involved on community engagement activities, they just usually don't." Such comments suggest that while programs and organizations describe their efforts as *inclusive*, their programming and activities are largely used by mothers. In reviewing these data, coalition members noted that participant responses placed the blame on fathers (external attribution) rather than how their programs were designed or delivered (internal attribution).

Theme 2: Prioritizing Mothers

An appendage to the first theme was that family programs and services, while inclusive of mothers and fathers, tended to target mothers or were reportedly more relevant to mothers. In general, comments demonstrated a structural prioritization of women in their programming, such as, "We mostly serve mothers" and "We primarily serve mothers except in some cases where there is a single father in charge of the household. Then we work with those fathers." Yet, there were also isolated accounts of unconscious bias against men. For example, a participant shared, "We represent victims of domestic violence, which are usually kids and women. Fathers are often the perpetrators." This quote demonstrates the reality that a majority of individuals coming to the service may be women and children, but it may not

consider that men may not feel comfortable coming to that agency, eventually creating a confirmation bias in the participant. Such claims would need additional data for confirmation, but given the low levels of father-friendliness of this participant, and participants as a whole, there is at least partial support for a bias against men.

Additionally, many respondents wrote "N/A" in comment boxes related to offering father-specific services or building capacity to engage fathers, sending the message that these efforts do not presumably fit with the work of the organization. Even more interesting is that of the 23 participants who indicated their organization offered services specifically for fathers, only a few could directly state the names of programs or services they provided.

Within this theme, mothers were also referenced as conduits to fathers. One participant wrote, "We don't work with fathers at this time. But the women are made aware of resources in the community that can benefit the fathers in their life." Similarly, another wrote, "No services directly to support the father. Our services directly support mothers, which may help support fathers if the mother is in a good place." Therefore, organizations targeted mothers and believed fathers could then benefit directly or indirectly with the help of the mother. Other participants implied that they might start with mothers, but are also open to working with fathers, especially if there is no maternal presence. For example, one participant wrote, "We provide mentoring, which can sometimes be to a single-parent father-headed household." This came up across several responses where participants pointed out single-parent, father-led households as recipients of their services. Comments like this suggested that mothers were prioritized, but in cases where families did not have a mother, they would connect with the father. Like these comments, the data showed a pattern of viewing mothers as the primary caretakers of children, whether that be through programmatic ideologies or lingering historical roots.

A few participants critiqued the system they worked within, pointing out that mothers might be (or seem) more accessible because most services intentionally target mothers. One participant wrote, "We offer information for families but not father-specific. I feel that when we reach out to parents to share information or share concerns, we reach out to mothers first." Similarly, another participant wrote, "Every bit of outreach I've seen appears to be catered to women, if not expressly addressed to mothers." Another participant even pointed out the historical bias that shapes their work with families: "Evidence-based home visiting historically has been mother focused, unfortunately." It appears that for a vast majority of programs, mothers were seen as the default parent to reach out to. When they were not available, then fathers may be included. Although few, these comments demonstrate an awareness of the history and macrolevel views that shape services for fathers.

This theme maps onto several survey items that position their services and programs as less father-friendly due to prioritizing mothers or not viewing their programs as relevant to fathers. For example, few respondents reported auditing their practices and policies for father-friendliness or surveying fathers, which makes sense given that many respondents reported directing efforts toward mothers. This theme can also help explain the significant drop-off of participants who opened the survey (n=238), consented to the survey (n=204), began answering the first question (n=145), and completed all survey items (n=122). We suggest this drop-off may be because the first question concerns father-related services. Rather than selecting strongly disagree, participants may have felt this survey was irrelevant to their program and exited it. This is despite recruitment efforts of the coalition that identified this person as someone who worked with fathers or families.

Theme 3: Father Engagement Can Be a Goal

Although few, there were participant responses that indicated high levels of father-friendliness within the work of several

47

organizations and programs in the community. These participants shared concrete examples of what their organization had accomplished or planned to support to increase father-friendliness. These data showed the importance of programs willing to and wanting to make changes within fathers' immediate environments. Most of these responses came from participants working in social services or the faith community. Some responses included the following: "We offer fatherhood engagement activities throughout the year;" "Our residential treatment groups do address family roles, fatherhood, and men-specific issues in recovery;" "We are hosting a dads only breakfast and father/child camp to provide encouragement;" and "We had a training on fathers and what our agency was doing to include fathers."

The above responses came from participants who were able to answer "strongly agree" to father-friendliness statements throughout the survey. Such responses showed that father engagement is, and can be, a goal that some services provide in the community. Many of these participants also communicated a strong belief that this work was essential to serving families and children—not simply that they were making their services more father-friendly but that it mattered (i.e., "We want fathers to know that they matter."). These participants were actively reviewing policies for their level of father-friendliness and acknowledging bias against fathers. This evidence consistently suggested that improving services for father engagement is beneficial and an important step in serving families, even as larger societal structures and systems are slow to evolve.

Additionally, there were future-oriented comments from participants who reported low levels of father-friendliness in their organization but could envision making father engagement a goal. Participants wrote comments such as, "Just added it to my list of specific considerations for the group" and "These questions brought awareness to our unintentional bias surrounding fathers. This makes me think that professional development would be helpful to support our programs in

shifting this attitude." Such comments suggested that the survey encouraged some participants to rethink how they could better serve fathers within their organization.

DISCUSSION

The fatherhood coalition began this study by asking, *How do local community and school professionals report the levels of father-friendliness within their organizations?* This locally generated question, in response to a growing problem for fathers, is not unique to the community. The marginalization of fathers in family-related services, programs, and scholarship is both a national (Amato, 2018; Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Posey-Maddox, 2017) and global issue (Leach et al., 2019; Nash, 2018).

Additionally, the coalition also desired to explore *in what ways organizations and schools reported supporting or neglecting fathers.* Survey data showed that most organizations, agencies, and schools in the community do not provide father-specific programming or services. Instead, the majority of survey respondents believed that fathers could benefit from their family-inclusive efforts *if* the fathers started attending or accessing those resources. However, previous research with fathers suggests that the inclusive language of parent and family is assumed to mean "moms" by many fathers and has marginalized their engagement (Miller et al., 2020, 2022; de Montigny et al., 2017). Using inclusive terminology in the name of these efforts without addressing the systemic bias behind such terminology is not inclusive and instead isolating. Therefore, designing events, programs, and resources specifically (and unapologetically) for fathers can help support greater inclusion in services, as fathers often feel left out in traditional family programs and activities. As a society, the macrolevel shift toward inclusion, diversity, equity, and access needs to consider how the traditional roles of men and fathers are no longer relevant (Enderstein & Boonzaier, 2015; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019) and that

fathers, too, need community services to thrive as parents.

Positively, a few organizations are taking concrete steps to engage fathers and disrupt structural biases in their organization, which could serve as models for others in the community. By learning about their efforts through the survey, the coalition was able to create a repository of community resources that could be used across the community. And, although there were isolated instances where participants demonstrated internalized bias against fathers, more commonly the survey respondents had simply neglected to consider fathers' perspectives in their work (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Leach et al., 2019), as larger policies and ideologies are not currently pushing programs to engage in father-centered work.

Though unintentional to the initial design of the study, we may have inadvertently created a community intervention that increased the community's recognition of the need to support father engagement. The eight questions included specific actions that an organization may need to better support fathers. When community administrators, service providers, and educators clicked through each question, they were forced to consider father-friendliness in relation to their roles and organizations. Thus, just by taking the survey, community partners may have been prompted to consider making changes in support of fathers. The survey may be the first step in thinking about how fathers are included or marginalized in their work with children and families. The survey appeared to put fathers "on the radar" for some participants, and they even expressed excitement about bringing a father-focused lens to their work. Although we did not initially consider the type of impact a simple survey could make, email responses with questions, positive feedback, and individual requests for meetings with someone from the coalition leadership team showed that the survey captured the attention of many survey recipients. Even further, in a few cases, survey recipients were so interested that they subsequently asked to join the coalition. The results presented here not only depict the perceptions of the participants but informed the community of future directions for their program to consider.

Evidence such as this may suggest the need for other communities to participate in similar community-based participatory research. Simply asking if community organizations have considered fathers might create systemic change. Similar to the initial design of McLean County Fatherhood Coalition and as referenced above, little change might come from one *community* updating its *practices* to include father information and input. However, a greater change could come from all *communities* identifying ways to further support fathers. Such changes could also help rewrite the ways in which fathers are viewed at more societal levels, and potentially change the blueprint for how we approach services for families and fathers, as direct services and societal views are inextricably tied (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Fathers desire to be part of the emerging script of contemporary fatherhood as they seek greater presence and visibility in their children's lives (Valiquette-Tessier, 2019). For fathers to enact these parental desires, community-based institutions and programs must respond to the new identities and needs of fathers. Findings from the study are being used to inform the group's outreach efforts and research directions. Our first step was to create a brief executive summary of the survey results and send them to all individuals on the distribution list. The one-page handout highlighted key findings and offered next steps for organizations to consider, such as surveying fathers to determine their needs, concerns, and interests; developing programs, groups, and events that are specific to fathers; hiring male staff or recruiting male volunteers to lead father-related efforts; and conducting a review of current policies and practices for how they might favor mothers. Coalition members also created a short video for local schools with tips on engaging fathers better and organized a father-child fishing event. We continue to revisit our data and findings to guide our outreach and determine new research questions to explore collaboratively.

CONCLUSION

We believe this study helps to address some of the prioritization of mothers and systemic bias against fathers in our community and holds the potential for organizations and schools to disrupt some of their practices that have marginalized and continue to marginalize fathers (Posey-Maddox, 2017). Results suggest that there is much room for increasing the level of father-friendliness in the community and helping organizations and schools recognize that their work intersects with fathers and their roles as parents. Instead of taking a defeatist attitude with the survey results, as the results painted a bleak picture of support for fathers in the community, the coalition viewed the data as an opportunity to bring about change in our community (Letiecq et al., 2022). We hope our process and outcomes might be used by other communities that desire to address a problem and work toward socially just change.

REFERENCES

Allen, S., & Daly, K. (2007). *The effects of father involvement: An updated research summary of the evidence inventory*. Father Involvement Research Alliance (FIRA). Centre for Families, Work & Well Being, University of Guelph. https://library.parenthelp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Effects_of_Father_Involvement.pdf

Amato, V. (2018). The social construction of a possible male gender bias is negatively impacting fathers in child welfare services: Hammering a square peg into a round hole. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, *28*(4), 466–474. https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2018.1426071

Arellanes, J. A., Greder, K. A., & Lohman, B. J. (2022). The intersection of first-generation Latino fathers' work, cultural values, and communication in their children's educational attainment. *Journal of Latinos and Education.* https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2022.2080680

Bazeley, P., & Jackson, K. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis with NVivo* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Bergin, C. A., & Bergin, D. A. (2018). *Child and adolescent development in your classroom* (3rd ed.). Wadsworth.

Boyatzis, R. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development.* Sage.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1986). Ecology of the family as a context for human development: Research perspectives. *Developmental Psychology*, *22*(6), 723–742.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (2005). Ecological systems theory (1992). In U. Bronfenbrenner (Ed.), *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development* (pp. 106–173). Sage Publications Ltd.

Brooks, R., & Hodkinson, P. (2020). Out-of-place: The lack of engagement with parent networks of caregiving fathers of young children. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, *9*(2), 201–216.

Cabrera, N., Fitzgerald, H., Bradley, R., & Roggman, L. (2014). The ecology of father–child relationships: An expanded model. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, *6*, 336–354. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12054

Caldwell, C. H., Rafferty, J., Reischl, T. M., De Loney, E. H., & Brooks, C. L. (2010). Enhancing parenting skills among nonresident African American fathers as a strategy for preventing youth risky behaviors. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *45*(1–2), 17–35. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-009-9290-4

Carrillo, S., Bermúdez, M., Suárez, L., Gutiérrez, M. C., & Delgado, X. (2016). Father's perceptions of their role and involvement in the family: A qualitative study in a Colombian sample. *Revista Costarricense de Psicología*, *35*(2), 37–54.

Conica, M., Nixon, E., & Quigley, J. (2020). Fathers' but not mothers' repetition of children's utterances at age two is associated with child vocabulary at age four. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, *191*, 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2019.104738

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Sage.

Cowan, P., Cowan, C., Pruett, M., Pruett, K., & Wong, J. (2009). Promoting fathers' engagement with children: Preventative interventions for low-income families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *71*(3), 663–679. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2009.00625.x

Curtis, C., Grinnell-Davis, C., & Alleyne-Green, B. (2017). The effects of father figure involvement on educational outcomes in Black adolescents. *Journal of Black Studies, 48*(6), 591–609. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934717706971

de Montigny, F., Gervais, C., Meunier, S., & Dubeau, D. (2017). Professionals' positive perceptions of fathers are associated with more favourable attitudes towards including them in family interventions. *Acta Paediatrica*, *106*(12), 1945–1951. https://doi.org/10.1111/apa.13970

Dubowitz, H., Giardino, A., & Gustavson, E. (2000). Child neglect: Guidance for pediatricians. *Pediatrics in Review*, *21*(4), 111–116. https://doi.org/10.1542/pir.21-4-111

Enderstein, A. M., & Boonzaier, F. (2015). Narratives of young South African fathers: Redefining masculinity through fatherhood. *Journal of Gender Studies*, *24*(5), 512–527. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2013.856751

Field, T.M. (1998). Early interventions for infants of depressed mothers. *Pediatrics, 102*, 1305–1310. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.102.SE1.1305

Gill, P., Scacco, S., De Haan, S., Gent, A., Chapin, L., Ganci, M., & Morda, R. (2021). Getting into the "Dad Zone": How do primary caregiving fathers of young children experience social support? *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *30*, 1028–1042. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-021-01919-1

Guarin, A., & Meyer, D. R. (2018). Are low earnings of nonresidential fathers a barrier to their involvement with children? *Children and Youth Services Review*, *91*, 304–318. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.06.023

Guterman, N. B., Bellamy, J. L., & Banman, A. (2018). Promoting father involvement in early home visiting services for vulnerable families: Findings from a pilot study of "Dads matter". *Child Abuse & Neglect*, *76*, 261–272. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.10.017

51

Hacker, K. (2013). *Community-based participatory research.* Sage.

Holmberg, J. R., & Olds, D. L. (2015). Father attendance in nurse home visitation. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, *36*(1), 128–139. https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.21490

Ivankova, N. V. (2015). *Mixed methods applications in action research: From methods to community action*. Sage.

Jeynes, W. H. (2015). A meta-analysis: The relationship between father involvement and student academic achievement. *Urban Education*, *50*(4), 387–423. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085914525789

Kelty, N. E., & Wakabayashi, T. (2020). Family engagement in schools: Parent, educator, and community perspectives. *Sage Open*, *10*(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020973024

Kim, S. W. (2018). How and why fathers are involved in their children's education: Gendered model of parent involvement. *Educational Review*, *70*(3), 280–299. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2017.1311304

Lantz, P. M., Viruell-Fuentes, E., Israel, B. A., Softley, D., & Guzman, R. (2001). Can communities and academia work together on public health research? Evaluation results from a community-based participatory research partnership in Detroit. *Journal of Urban Health*, *78*(3), 495–507. https://doi.org/10.1093/jurban/78.3.495

Leach, L. S., Bennetts, S. K., Giallo, R., & Cooklin, A. R. (2019). Recruiting fathers for parenting research using online advertising campaigns: Evidence from an Australian study. *Child: Care, Health, and Development*, *45*(6), 871–876. https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12698

Lechowicz, M. E., Jiang, Y., Tully, L. A., Burn, M. T., Collins, D. A., Hawes, D. J., ... & Frick, P. J. (2019). Enhancing father engagement in parenting programs: Translating research into practice recommendations. *Australian Psychologist*, *54*(2), 83–89. https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12361

Lee, S. J., Hoffman, G., & Harris, D. (2016). Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) needs assessment of parenting support programs for fathers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *66*, 76–84. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.05.004

Lee, Y. (2023). Online media experiences of caregiving fathers: A study of leave-taking fathers in South Korea. *Family Relations*, *72*(2), 426–442. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12817

Letiecq, B. L., Vesely, C. K., & Goodman, R. D. (2022). Family-centered participatory action research: With, by, and for families. In K. Adamsons, A. L. Few-Demo, C. Proulx, & K. Roy (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theories and methodologies: A dynamic approach* (pp. 483–503). Springer.

Livingston, G., & Parker, K. (2019). *8 facts about American dads.* Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/06/12/fathers-day-facts/

Lundahl, B. W., Tollefson, D., Risser, H., & Lovejoy, M. C. (2008). A meta-analysis of father involvement in parent training. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *18*(2), 97–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731507309828

McWayne, C., Downer, J. T., Campos, R., & Harris, R. D. (2013). Father involvement during early childhood and its association with children's early learning: A meta-analysis. *Early Education & Development*, *24*(6), 898–922. https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2013.746932

Miller, K., Arellanes, J., & James, L. (2022). Support father engagement: What can we learn from fathers? *Journal of Family Diversity in Education, 4*(2), 95-114. https://doi.org/10.53956/jfde.2022.151

Miller, K., Davis, D., Kloppman, E., & Cobbins, S. (2020). Promoting equity and inclusivity with fathers: The work of a local fatherhood coalition. *Social Work Today, 20*(5), 30–34.

Nash, M. (2018). Addressing the needs of first-time fathers in Tasmania: A qualitative study of father-only antenatal groups. *Australian Journal of Rural Health*, *26*(2), 106–111. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajr.12371

National Fatherhood Initiative. (2016). *Father-friendly check-up*. http://www.fatherhood.org/ffcu

Newland, L., Freeman, H., & Coyl, D. (2011). *Emerging topics on father attachment: Consideration in theory, context and development*. Routledge.

Olds, D. L. (2002). Prenatal and infancy home visiting by nurses: From randomized trials to community replication. *Prevention Science*, *3*(3), 153–172. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1019990432161

Påfs, J., Rulisa, S., Musafili, A., Essýn, B., & Binder-Finnema, P. (2016). 'You try to play a role in her pregnancy': A qualitative study on recent fathers' perspectives about childbearing and encounter with the maternal health system in Kigali, Rwanda. *Global Health Action*, *9*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.3402/gha.v9.31482

Panter-Brick, C., Burgess, A., Eggerman, M., McAllister, F., Pruett, K., & Leckman, J. F. (2014). Practitioner review: Engaging fathers — recommendations for a game change in parenting interventions based on a systematic review of the global evidence. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *55*(11), 1187–1212. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12280

Perry, A. (2011). Man up: Integrating fatherhood and community engagement. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, *4*(1), 15–24. DOI: 10.54656/WADM8628

Piskernik, B., & Ahnert, L. (2019). Advancing research and measurement on fathering and child development: V. What does it mean when fathers are involved in parenting? *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, *84*(1), 64–78.

Posey-Maddox, L. (2017). Schooling in suburbia: The intersections of race, class, gender, and place in black fathers' engagement and family–school relationships. *Gender and Education*, *29*(5), 577–593. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1274389

QSR International Pty Ltd. (2018). *NVivo qualitative data analysis software* (Version 12). https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home

Sanders, M. R., Kirby, J. N., Tellegen, C. L., & Day, J. J. (2014). The Triple P-Positive Parenting Program: A systematic review and meta-analysis of a multi-level system of parenting support. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *34*(4), 337–357. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2014.04.003

Valiquette-Tessier, S. C., Gosselin, J., Young, M., & Thomassin, K. (2019). A literature review of cultural stereotypes associated with motherhood and fatherhood. *Marriage & Family Review*, 55(4), 299–329. https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2018.1469567

Verschueren, K. (2020). Attachment, self-esteem, and socio-emotional adjustment: There is more than just the mother. *Attachment & Human Development*, *22*(1), 105–109. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616734.2019.1589066

Wall, G., & Arnold, S. (2007). How involved is involved fathering?: An exploration of the contemporary culture of fatherhood. *Gender & Society, 21*(4), 508-527. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243207304973

Wallerstein, N., Duran, B., Oetzel, J., & Minkler, M. (2018). *Community-based participatory research for health: Advancing social and health equity* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Kyle Miller, PhD*
Professor
School of Teaching and Learning
College of Education
Illinois State University
Campus Box 5330
Normal, Illinois 61790, United States
Email: kemille@ilstu.edu
Bio: Kyle Miller was an urban educator and school support coordinator before joining the School of Teaching and Learning at Illinois State University. She teaches courses related to child development, elementary education, and research methods. Her research focuses on home-school relationships, father engagement, and social justice.

Jordan A. Arellanes, PhD
Assistant Professor
Department of Psychology
College of Arts and Science
Illinois State University
DeGarmo 442
Normal, Illinois 61790, United States
Email: jaarell@ilstu.edu
Bio: Jordan A. Arellanes is a developmental psychologist at Illinois State University whose research considers the social roles of individuals and families. His research has a particular interest in supporting fathers and the educational attainment of Latino youth. He teaches courses such as introduction to psychology, Latino psychology, and qualitative and mixed methods for the social sciences.

AUTHORS' NOTE

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kyle Miller, School of Teaching and Learning, Illinois State University, Normal, IL, 61790. Email: kemille@ilstu.edu