

**A LANDSCAPE  
SNAPSHOT**

Equimundo: Center  
for Masculinities and  
Social Justice

# WHO CARES ABOUT AMERICA'S MALE CAREGIVERS?

*Laying the Groundwork  
for a National Strategy to  
Support Fathers*

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# 1

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## INTRODUCTION

*“There is no such thing as a fatherless child – the question is where does he exist and how to bring [the father] back to the child.”<sup>1</sup>*

As a country, we face a storm of overlapping crises, resulting in exhaustion, grief, stresses on our mental health, polarization, and pessimism. In moments of crisis, we often seek to identify a single root issue, which if addressed, might turn the tide and find us in calmer waters. **Caring** for each other – in our homes, workplaces, schools, and elsewhere – is something that we all need and that helps us all thrive.

Our households have felt even more overburdened in terms of care throughout these past few years of pandemic. **Care has become more visible and even more obviously central to our lives** as we’ve schooled our kids at home, seen our homes turned into makeshift offices and classrooms, and worried about our work, education, relationships, and futures. In this context, the lack of support for all caregivers has become even more apparent.

At the same time, **there has been a growing conversation about manhood in the US** – most often, focusing on the negative. #MeToo has brought an urgent and necessary discussion about some men’s abuse of power. Inflation, fluctuating employment, and persistent income inequality have also led to urgent conversations about the ongoing lack of equity in the workplace for women, particularly women of color.

In the midst of these challenges, the expression “toxic masculinity” has become an oversimplified shorthand to describe a host of harmful ideas about manhood that must be addressed. But in the process of **calling out** harmful ideas of manhood and ongoing gender inequalities, we too often fail to **call men in** to healthy, connected, equitable, and caring ideas of manhood. We also fail to recognize the myriad ways that many men are already involved in caregiving and seeking to be allies in creating a more equitable world. We don’t amplify caring, connected, nurturing

forms of masculinity often enough, even though these could be important models to see and build on for children – both boys and girls.

**We propose a national effort toward achieving healthy expressions of masculinity and greater equality and social justice in the US by focusing on men’s capacity to give care, which often (but not exclusively) manifests in the practice of fatherhood in all its diversity.**

*“While we agree that there is a toxic form of masculinity, the narrative that’s developed in our country tends to portray men in general and masculinity itself as toxic – a view that’s extreme and imbalanced – as if there’s not a healthy form of masculinity.”*

<sup>1</sup> The quotes throughout this report are from the many leaders on fatherhood and men’s caregiving in the US who shared their time and input. The full list of these participants is provided at the end of this report.

This report asks: what is the current landscape of programs, approaches, and platforms for supporting fatherhood and men's caregiving in the US? We take a snapshot of this field as a step toward building greater coordination and collaboration across those working in fatherhood and male caregiving in the US. We also provide recommendations for greater attention to this vital space and issue.

This report is part of the MenCare campaign ([www.men-care.org](http://www.men-care.org)). Created in 2011, MenCare is a global fatherhood campaign active in more than 60 countries that is led by Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice (US) and Sonke Gender Justice (South Africa). Its mission is to promote men's involvement as equitable fathers and caregivers in order to achieve family well-being, gender equality, and better health for mothers, fathers, and children. MenCare partners work at multiple levels to engage men, women, individuals of all gender identities, institutions, and policymakers in achieving gender equality and supporting and encouraging men's caregiving. The campaign is founded on the core idea that more involved and equitable caregiving by men is good for women, children, societies, and men themselves.

This report provides a foundational look at fatherhood programming and platforms in the US to support the creation of a national US network to call attention to and support men's caregiving affiliated with the global MenCare network. This report was prepared by Equimundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice ([www.equimundo.org](http://www.equimundo.org)) in dialogue with some of the key experts and leaders on fatherhood and care equality in the US. It is

the vast body of work of so many organizations and individuals – listed at the end of this publication – to support men's caregiving, care equality, and involved fatherhood that inspired us to undertake this review. Quotes from these experts and advocates are included throughout this report.

This review is centered around the following questions:

- Where are the deserts of need – in other words, the gaps in support, funding, and programming for fathers?
- Where is the landscape nourished by rivers of support – in other words, who funds, supports, and makes possible fatherhood work?
- Where are people concentrated in their work? How are they already organized, and what have they learned?

We began work in May 2022 to develop this snapshot by surveying the fatherhood field; this involved a desk review, surveying of the fatherhood and caregiving field in the US, a series of over 30 hour-long key informant interviews representing a diversity of geographical, programmatic, and issue approaches, and an in-person convening of a cross section of leaders, service providers, researchers, and stakeholders. This report is a synthesis of this ongoing dialogue with leaders in the fatherhood and men's caregiving space. We ask as many questions as we provide answers. But our hope is that this analysis sparks action at a national level.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS: A SNAPSHOT OF THE US FATHERHOOD LANDSCAPE AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The US landscape of fatherhood and support for men's caregiving is a small one relative to the country's size and the scope of related issues. For an area so vital to so many households – and one so strongly related to family poverty and gender equality – funders and governments pay far too little attention to fatherhood and men's caregiving. Our research has led to the following key conclusions.

**First, there are many organizations and individuals – from bloggers, individual authors, and activists to small and large organizations to university-based researchers to workplace-funded initiatives – focusing on fatherhood and men's caregiving. But numerous factors are contributing to clustering, isolation, or other shortfalls in terms of connecting around their common cause.**

By and large, the most experienced leadership in the fatherhood programming field comes from organizations led by people of color (Black, Latinx, Native American, and immigrant-led organizations). These organizations have the most extensive experience in responding to the crises of racial injustice, mass incarceration, and economic deprivation that are at the root of much of

what has been simplistically termed the “father absence” crisis in the US.

In parallel, there are a number of organizations and individuals who support mostly middle-class fathers or male caregivers; these are often white-led and have emerged from men’s growing participation in the daily care of children and others in the household (including the growing number of stay-at-home fathers). These individuals and organizations are responding to the shifting realities and, indeed, to many men’s desire to find identity, support, and meaning in their expanding roles as caregivers.

Also overlapping with these two “fatherhood streams” are the mostly women-led organizations calling attention to the care economy and care inequality. These organizations and individual leaders have spearheaded decades of advocacy for nationally supported paid family leave, equality for women in the workplace, and subsidized, high-quality childcare. These organizations have long supported men’s greater involvement in caregiving; indeed, they see men’s participation as vital to achieving care equality.

Among these three “camps” of fatherhood-related work in the US, we find too few or too tenuous connections to achieve consistent and sustained momentum against the forces that continue to drive inequality.

**Second, a handful of networking organizations are disseminating research and sharing resources, but despite thoughtful work, these clearinghouses are only able to reach relatively small numbers of fathers and male caregivers given a combination of infrastructure barriers and the often-disconnected state of the men who would be their prime audience.** Much more needs to be done to have a visible national discussion and resource base for fathers and male caregivers that can also carry out joint advocacy. Key informants

to this report expressed the need for more visible and regular knowledge-sharing and dialogue amongst the numerous communities of fatherhood and men’s caregiving advocates across the US. Additionally, greater policy-level advocacy is needed on behalf of these issues generally, and a critical mass of support systems must exist. Our key informants also cited the need to discuss fatherhood and men’s caregiving in ways that take diversity into account – including the diversity of nuclear, extended, and blended families; families and caregiving in households in all their diversity of gender and sexuality; and households of diverse ethnic origin.

**Third, the funding stream for fatherhood programming is relatively small, both at various levels of government as well as from philanthropy.** The majority of existing funding rightly focuses on the vulnerable and highest-need groups and addresses problems that are often driven by larger structures of mass incarceration, poverty, and systemic racism (i.e., child support, workforce placement, and father proximity). Federal funding and myriad state and local funds support vital direct services and training for fathers and their families. This work is led by creative, committed individuals and organizations attuned to the cultural realities of the populations they serve. But this work often just scratches the surface of the limited economic opportunities, lack of affordable housing, and fragmented health and social service system for our country’s most vulnerable families. In sum, these public dollars are vital to supporting programs for fathers and families, but they rarely provide the integrated, long-term support and systems that fathers and families need to thrive.

Organizations looking to carry out other types of holistic work with fathers and families (including work on nurturing fatherhood, father presence, caregiving equality, and caring masculinities, to name a few areas) often must develop their own resources or conduct this work adjacent – not central – to their funded mission. There

is simply not enough funding from public or private sources or enough attention to promoting men’s full and equitable participation as caregivers given the size of the demand and need.

**Fourth, participants in this landscape analysis affirmed the need to support fathers and men’s caregiving alongside and in common cause with mothers, women’s caregiving, and women’s equality and well-being – all on behalf of the evident benefits to children.** The lack of attention to and support for fathers is a function of the lack of childcare policies, guaranteed paid leave, and support for all families – particularly low-income families – at the national level, all issues that continue to affect women first and foremost. We affirm that men’s caregiving is not, and should never be, a stand-alone issue. It is part of the larger cause of achieving full racial and gender equity in the US, fully supporting individuals of all sexual orientations and gender identities, and helping men achieve healthy and caring versions of manhood.

Based on these overarching conclusions from our discussions with key partners, we affirm the need for creating a national network to support men’s caregiving, affiliated with the global MenCare network, focusing on:

- **Information exchange** across the diversity of fatherhood “streams” in the US and including strong links to women-led and women’s equality-centered work on the care economy;
- **Collective advocacy for policies and narratives** that promote men’s caregiving and involved, supported, and equitable fatherhood; and
- **Engagement of men across the US to vote for policies that support the care economy**, alongside women and women-led activism and advocacy in this space.

## STARTING THE CONVERSATION: WHAT WE MEAN BY “MEN’S CAREGIVING,” “FATHERS,” AND “FATHERHOOD”

We use the words “fathers” and “fatherhood” many times in this report. While in numerous instances we focus on biological fatherhood, we aim to support and call attention to men’s caregiving in the broadest sense of the term. We refer to the many ways men can and should be caregivers:

- In nuclear households with one or two parents/caregivers of any sexual orientation, including biological fathers of children and men in other care relationships, caring for older or ill family members, or family members with disabilities;
- In extended households in which grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, cousins, and other adults are present and involved in care;
- By both fathers and male caregivers of all kinds who live with their children (or other children they are responsible for) and those who do not live with their children;
- By men living in all households in terms of care responsibilities that extend beyond the care of people, to include domestic work (such as cooking, cleaning, and the emotional labor of caring for homes);
- By boys participating in unpaid care and domestic activities in the home, including cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings – activities far more likely to be carried out by girls;
- As political commitments among male policymakers and men with decision-making roles in workplaces to advance greater equality in economies of care and family leave policies, as well as greater valuing of care and care professions; and
- By men working in paid care professions, including nursing, childcare, elder care, and other paid caregiving arrangements and professions.

Achieving men’s greater participation in caregiving involves supporting individual men and fathers to be fully involved caregivers, and more crucially, transformations in the structural factors that drive and influence the value of care in society and who undertakes that work. These factors include changes in laws and policies, with adequate resourcing and clear implementation plans; changes in institutions such as schools, workplaces, and health facilities, including in how they work; changes in culture, narratives, and gendered norms around care work; and changes in our public and private lives and livelihoods.





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**THE US FATHERHOOD  
LANDSCAPE BY THE  
NUMBERS**

Much of the conversation about men's involvement in caregiving comes from a deficit perspective: men's lack of adequate participation or their absence. Yet research carried out by Equimundo as part of its 2019 *State of the World's Fathers* report found the vast majority of men in the US – more than 80 percent – say they would “do whatever it takes to be very involved” in the early stages of caring for a newborn or adopted child ([van der Gaag et al., 2019](#)). Much research and many advocates have long debunked ideas that men “don't care” or don't want to be more involved caregivers. Other researchers have long debunked harmful conceptions of non-residential or low-income fathers as “deadbeat” dads, instead highlighting the great lengths that low-income fathers and male caregivers often go to, in the face of poverty and unsupportive social welfare systems, to be involved fathers.

This research has shown that a significant proportion of fathers would change jobs if it meant they had more access to paid leave or flexible schedules to have more time with their families.

So, what keeps some men from being the involved caregivers they want to be? Several factors are in play:

- A lack of economic security and adequate support for many parents and caregivers;
- Restrictive gender norms – emerging from both positively and negatively reinforced models of masculinity throughout US culture – that equate care with “women's work” and the widespread beliefs that women are more competent caregivers and that men should be the breadwinners;
- Lack of access to adequate, paid leave and other supportive workplace policies for all caregivers; and
- Concerns that men (and women) will be seen as less-than-competitive workers if they make care a priority.

*“In coaching hundreds of Black and brown dads I have seen ample evidence of the caregiving they undertake to raise their children in whatever custodial configuration they have, i.e., co-parenting, joint legal custody, or full custody. These men have shown us that being a caregiver is innate, natural, and they're open to learning more about their caregiving roles as dads.”*

Here are some of the numbers behind these factors.

## RESTRICTIVE SOCIAL NORMS SHAPE OUR LIVED REALITIES

- Women perform unpaid household and care work an average of 5.1 hours per day, compared to 4.1 hours for men ([US Bureau of Labor Statistics \[BLS\], n.d.](#)).
- 71 percent of men do housework compared to 86 percent of women ([BLS, 2021](#)).
- Care professionals – such as nursing, elder care, and health care workers – continue to be overwhelmingly female, including – for example – 87 percent of all child, family, and school social workers, 87 percent of all registered nurses, 87 percent of all home health aides, and 95 percent of all childcare workers ([BLS, 2022](#)).

- Restrictive social norms around caregiving are widely repeated in schools, workplaces, and the media we consume. A recent study on how fatherhood is portrayed on TV by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media and Equimundo found:
  - “Female caregivers were doing one-third more on-screen caregiving tasks (such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and play) than male caregivers.”
  - “Male caregivers were nearly twice as likely as female caregivers to be shown as incompetent – a perpetuation of the ‘apprentice dad’ trope.”
  - “Male caregivers were one and a half times as likely as female caregivers to be emotionally abusive and four times as likely to be physically abusive – a perpetuation of the ‘abusive dad’ trope.”
  - “Male caregivers were less likely than female caregivers to be depicted as affectionate, supportive, or offering emotional care” ([Ashton et al., 2022](#)).

## KEY INSTITUTIONS DO NOT SUPPORT MALE CAREGIVING OR CAREGIVING IN GENERAL

- The cost of full-time care in childcare centers, nationally, is 85 percent of the US median cost of monthly rent ([Schulte & Durana, 2016](#)).
- 72 percent of Fortune 500 companies offer paid parental leave; half of these offer up to twice as much leave to mothers as they do to fathers (i.e., gender-unequal leave) ([Kaufman & Petts, 2020](#)).
- Just 17 percent of all US civilian workers have access to paid family leave ([BLS, 2019a](#)).
- Men *want* to take part but are held back: 73 percent of dads say fathers have little workplace support, and 21 percent say they had feared they would lose their job if they had taken all of the paternity leave offered to them. Additionally, 69 percent of fathers would change jobs to spend more time with their children ([Equimundo & Dove Men+Care, n.d.](#)).

## THE LACK OF A DEEPER NATIONAL CONVERSATION ABOUT CARING MASCULINITIES MEANS THAT HARMFUL AND VIOLENT EXPRESSIONS OF MASCULINITIES TOO OFTEN PREVAIL

- Based on survey research by Equimundo, about one-third of young men aged 18 to 30 in the US agree with restrictive or harmful ideas about manhood. Those young men who agreed with indicators of dominant, aggressive masculinity also showed a higher likelihood of engaging in violent behavior and experiencing depression and suicidal ideation ([Hill et al., 2020](#)).
- One in three women in America has experienced intimate partner violence ([Black et al., 2011](#)). One in 15 children has witnessed or otherwise experienced intimate partner violence within the past year, and 28 percent will have witnessed physical intimate partner violence by the time they turn 17 ([Hamby et al., 2011](#)). Intimate partner violence represents 15 percent of violent crime in the US ([Truman & Morgan, 2014](#)).

## GOVERNMENTAL POLICY TOO OFTEN DISCOURAGES AND PREVENTS MEN'S CAREGIVING

- The US is one of only six countries – and the only wealthy one – without a national paid family leave policy ([Miller, 2021](#)).
- The US spends less on children than almost all other developed nations, about \$3,600 per child annually. The international average is \$5,200 per child annually, with some nations spending up to \$14,000 ([Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021](#)).
- In the US, only 11 states (plus the District of Columbia) have state-level paid family leave programs. North Dakota actively *banned* cities and counties from enacting paid leave policies ([Bipartisan Policy Center, 2022](#)). Childcare in North Dakota is an average \$9,248 per year, or 32 percent of a North Dakotan single-parent household income ([Child Care Aware of America, 2020](#)).

## CITIZEN DAD: MEN AREN'T INVOLVED ENOUGH IN VOTING FOR CARE POLICIES

Compared to women, men (including fathers) are on average less likely to support the kinds of care policies and economic policies we all need, pointing to the need for actions to engage men as political allies in the care economy. For example:

- Since 1980, the “gender gap” in turnout between women and men voters has grown from 0 percentage points to 4; that means more women than men now vote in major elections (63 percent versus 59 percent) ([Igielnik, 2020](#)).
- Only 40 percent of men “strongly support” a national paid family and medical leave policy that would cover all people who are working, compared to 58 percent of women ([National Partnership for Women & Families \[NPWF\], 2018](#)).
- 75 percent of women say that “most people in the US who work should be able to take up to a few months of paid time off from their job” for family or medical reasons, while 59 percent of men agree ([NPWF, 2018](#)).
- 75 percent of women think companies should offer **both mothers and fathers** paid parental leave, while 61 percent of men agree; 21 percent of fathers say **companies should offer mothers – but not fathers – parental leave** ([Ballard, 2021](#)).
- Where programs are in place for fathers, low and partial attendance remains an endemic issue, such as an average attendance of six out of 16 sessions at the Center for Urban Families’ Developing All Dads for Manhood and Parenting (DAD MAP) program or an average attendance of 50 percent in the Ridge Project’s programming ([Fatherhood Research and Practice Network, 2018](#)). This is despite evidence that participation in these programs led to positive parenting and familial outcomes ([Fatherhood Research and Practice Network, 2018](#)), as well as studies showing that greater support for fathers’ involvement and family leave would have beneficial economic effects:
  - Paid leave and universal childcare policies could boost the US economy by \$1 trillion ([Moody’s, 2022](#)).
  - Two-thirds of voters say they would “face serious financial hardship if [they] had to take up to a few months of unpaid time off” from work for family or medical reasons ([NPWF, 2018](#)).

# 3

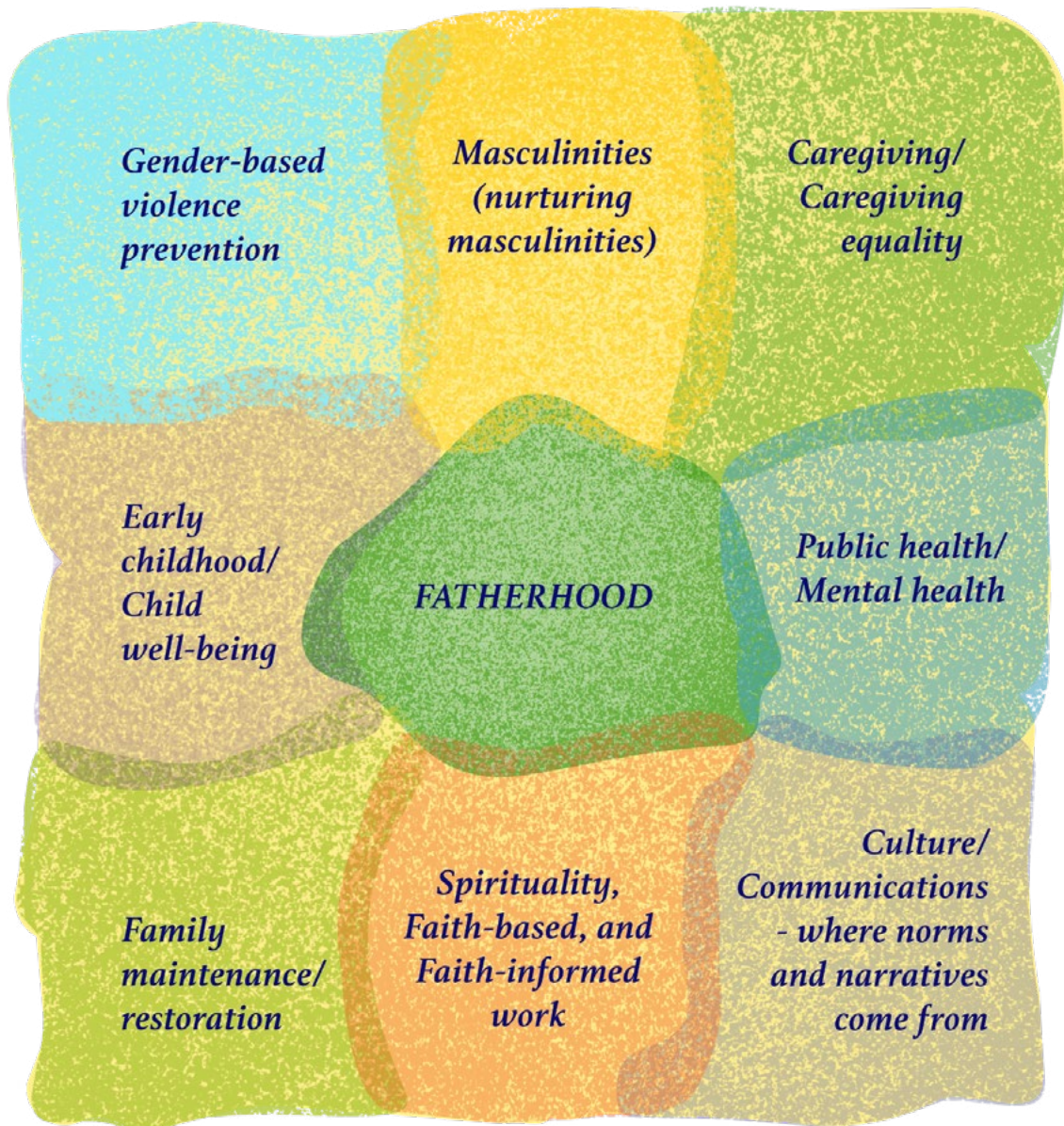
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## A BRIEF MAPPING OF THE US FATHERHOOD PROGRAMMING AND ADVOCACY LANDSCAPE

Far from a simplistic or monolithic field – and often unknown to many funders and the general public – the fatherhood space in the US is composed of an array of programs, initiatives, and individuals that are as diverse as the country itself. In this study, we identified numerous intersecting “issue territories” that comprise and are adjacent to fatherhood and male caregiving, as seen in Figure 1. This diversity of approaches

and topics is a strength of the field but also complicates efforts to create a unified field or build common cause, as the following analysis will show. Figure 1 helps illustrate the ways that direct fatherhood programming should not and cannot exist in a box, but in fact, connects to other key constituents, population groups, social inequities, and social realities.

**FIGURE 1** - The “issue territories” or themes relevant to the fatherhood and men’s caregiving landscape



## FATHERHOOD

Zooming in on the fatherhood issue territory (Figure 2), we can see the four largest categories of organizational work to support or engage fathers are:

### 1. Direct Fatherhood or Father-Serving Programs:

In the US, direct program work on fatherhood is almost exclusively supported within the framework of Responsible Fatherhood. The sole federal resources directed explicitly toward fatherhood work (from the US Department of Health and Human Services [HHS]) is termed the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, the administration of which is handled through a multiyear bid contract currently held by Fathers Incorporated. As a result, organizations seeking federal support generally align themselves with this framework of responsible fatherhood. To describe responsible fatherhood, HHS uses the acronym FIRE: Family-focused, Interconnected, Resilient, and Essential (HHS, 2020). Within federally funded fatherhood programs, work under this rubric of responsible fatherhood has three primary facets: (1) child support (i.e., enforcement of financial responsibility to one's offspring); (2) workforce engagement/employment (making sure dad is employed and providing); and (3) *presence*, a concept that sometimes connects into nurturing/caregiving but often simply means proximity.

The prevalence of these facets can largely be traced to several factors: the legacies of mass incarceration and racial oppression, which led to the absentee father crisis first named in the mid-1990s; the history in the US of the male breadwinner model of the nuclear family; and the limited and often punitive nature

of income support to low-income families. Kenneth Braswell, director of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse and one of this report's key informant interviews, calls for a focus on **father presence**, calling it the *moral imperative* of all fatherhood work in the US.

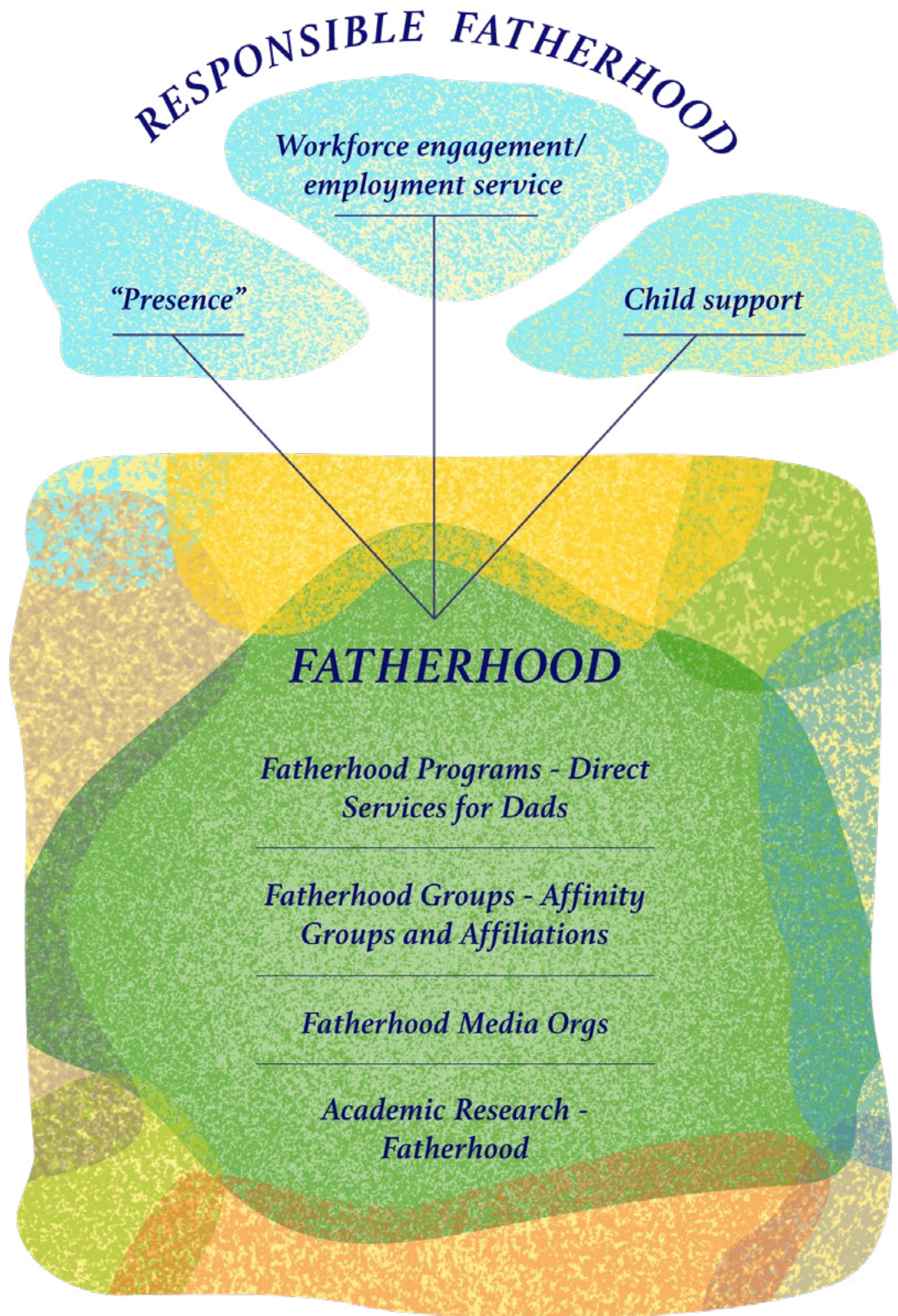
The majority of direct-service fatherhood programs in the US are directed at men of color, mostly low-income and working-class fathers, and they tend to be Black-led. This is linked to a history of racial exclusion and poverty and the legacy of racist mass incarceration in the US. As such, these organizations' constituencies demonstrate a significant overlap between incarcerated/re-entering populations and the general population.

The frequent and necessary critique of the responsible fatherhood framework – by program staff themselves – is that it forces organizations into a framework that situates the challenges of low-income fathers as individual failings rather than letting these organizations focus their programming (and funding) on the structural factors and life circumstances that are far more often the drivers of these challenges. Clearly, this array of programs is diverse, and this critique is largely based on the way government funding is structured. Overall, responsible fatherhood risks becoming a hoop that local direct-service programs must jump through to be funded by governmental sources.

Direct fatherhood or father-serving programs are the largest segment of fatherhood programs, but there are three other large territories of fatherhood-focused activities.

*“Responsible fatherhood has been made necessary by a history of irresponsible policies.”*

**FIGURE 2** - Programmatic/organizational detail of the fatherhood issue territor





## 2. Fatherhood Groups:

A broad and heterogenous category, fatherhood groups are frequently established online and function as affinity or mutual aid/support groups, some of which have grown into more formal organizations. Some of these organizations are primarily conveners, built around a conference schedule or set up to facilitate local-level, in-person meetups. To a greater extent than direct service programs, fatherhood groups are more often middle-class, are likely to be white-led and/or include suburban/affluent constituents, and receive less (if any) government funding. They tend to raise funds with dues, subscriptions, and sales/business models (including conference registration

fees, advertising, or corporate sponsorship), as well as leverage extensive volunteerism. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a rapid increase in the prevalence of and participation in these groups, largely as online mutual aid and support groups for fathers working from home or thrust into a caregiving role by job losses or pandemic-imposed changes in family employment. Much research, including [by Equimundo and Oxfam-US](#), has affirmed how men were carrying out more care work during COVID-19 lockdowns, but also that increased caregiving led to considerable confusion; in particular, an increasing number of men felt unsure about their role as providers and their employment prospects.

*“There is a lot of shame around caregiving fathers in affluent suburbia.”*

## 3. Fatherhood Media and Online Networking Organizations

These largely online media spaces and platforms are where original and curated content related to fatherhood is shared and communities of readership/viewership are formed. Similar to and overlapping with fatherhood groups, these organizations are funded largely through some business model, whether it is book sales, subscriptions, or advertising. Included in this category are the small handful of individuals who might be considered fatherhood “influencers” in the social media/celebrity sphere and who primarily function by creating fatherhood-related content for distribution online.

## 4. Academic Research Centers

*Specific, intentional* research on fatherhood itself is fairly limited in the US compared to other topics related to gender equality, family well-being, and child development. Fatherhood-related research tends to overlap with or be centered around an adjacent theme in the landscape, such as caregiving equality (related to workforce presence and economic concerns), public health, or early childhood development. This points to research centers’ utility as places to connect otherwise disparate issue territories; however, we also acknowledge feedback from stakeholders in the fatherhood space that they perceive much of the academic research produced in this space to be disconnected from or disregarding the daily realities of their work.

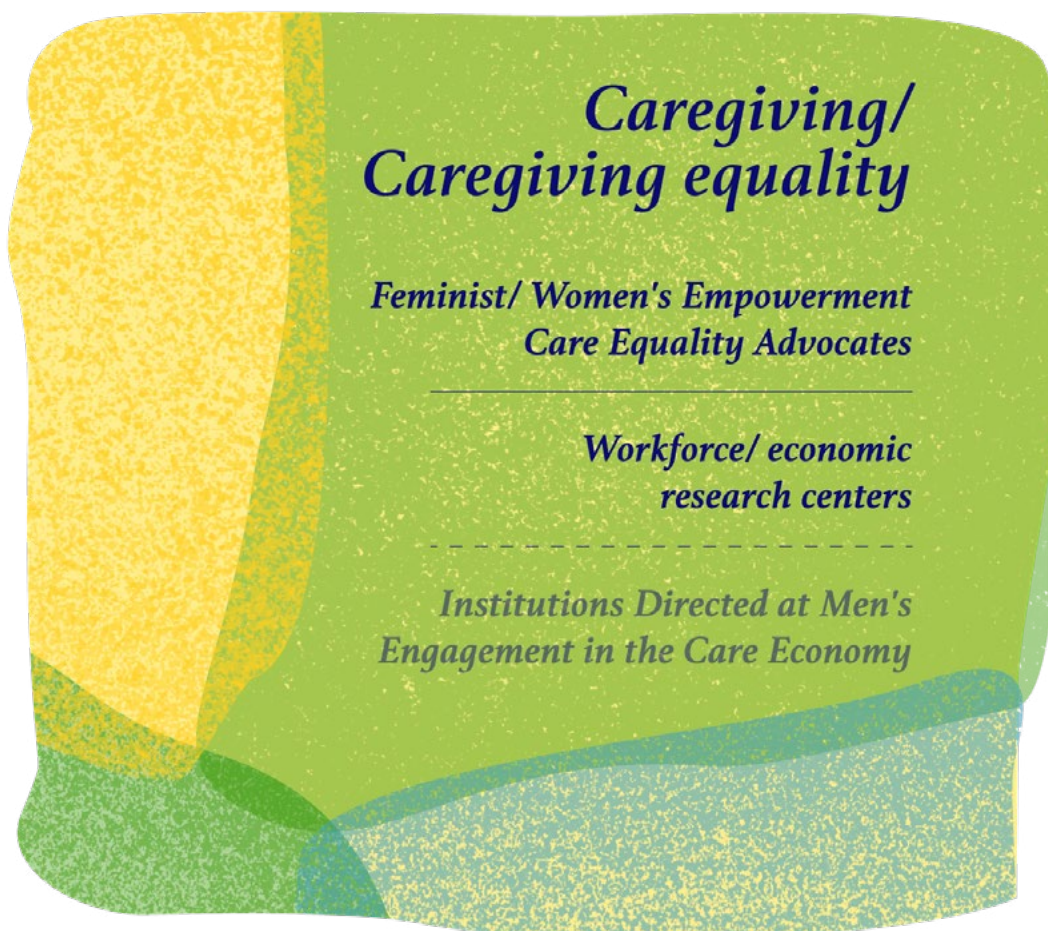
# SEIZING THE MOMENT: LINKING FATHERHOOD TO THE GROWING CONVERSATION ABOUT THE CARE ECONOMY AND CAREGIVING EQUALITY

As we’ve noted, COVID has called even greater attention to the lack of support that families across the US have for the care we all need – care of children, care of homes, care of older adults, and beyond. Adjacent to fatherhood work in the US is a network of women-led organizations that have long sounded the alarm about the inadequate federal-level funding and policies to support

our care economy. Some of these efforts focus on “work-life balance” (the more middle-class phrasing), while others look at the way time poverty interacts with income poverty, calling it the “care crisis.” Figure 3 maps this thematic region: caregiving and caregiving equality.

*“The word ‘balance’ is overused. I wish we could retire the phrase ‘work-life balance’ and just talk instead about life, which gets divided up into so many different uses of our time! Can we keep the ability to work from home alive to have more trust and flexibility to be a caregiver and a worker and be allowed to do well at both? If that means two to three days a week in an office, okay.”*

**FIGURE 3** - Programmatic/organizational detail of the caregiving/caregiving equality issue territory



**This issue territory is populated by organizations working to support caregiving for mothers and female caregivers, the crisis of the care economy, and the basic acknowledgment of unpaid care work in the home as a form of labor and, therefore, a necessary factor in any economic calculation.**

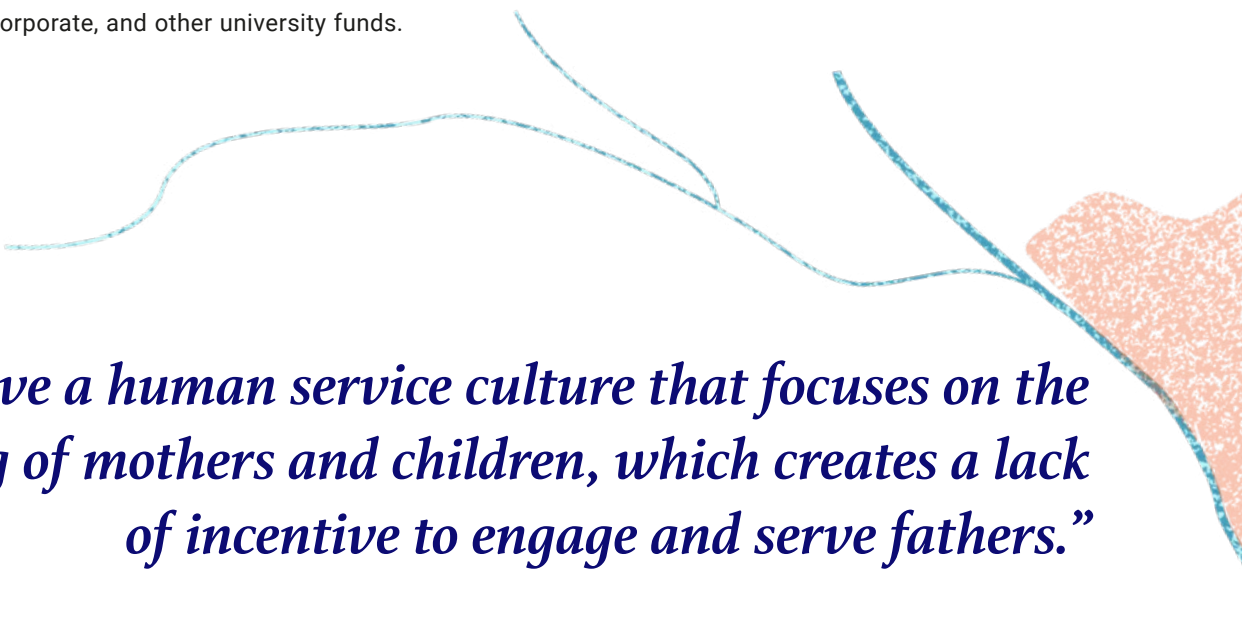
The first category of organizations in this territory – feminist and women’s empowerment care equality advocates – are mostly not-for-profits, mostly funded by foundations, and nearly all women-led, and they combine research, media, and policy advocacy in their programming. These organizations have often invited or mentioned men or male caregivers, but their actions are not generally directed at them. The organizations we heard from are interested in partnering with men and men-led initiatives to achieve the common cause of care equality and joint advocacy for policies to support all caregivers. **However, an important consideration we heard in interviews: forging these kinds of organizational allyships with male-led and/or male-focused organizations is sometimes fraught because it isn’t always clear when a male-oriented or father-focused organization is going to be friendly, receptive, or understanding of work rooted in feminism, gender equality, and mutually supportive partnership.**

Within this territory, there is also a cluster of mostly academically based research organizations that work in workforce studies and economics. These organizations often bridge several academic institutions by bringing researchers with common interests together, and while they are limited to research outputs, they more often offer intentional focus on fatherhood and male caregiving and provide important policy analysis. These centers are generally funded by an array of foundation, corporate, and other university funds.

Some prominent fatherhood research, such as that of the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network, is funded by multiyear government grants, but this funding is often not renewed when administrations change, and with them, policy priorities.

**In this mapping of organizations working in the care economy, we highlight a gap in programming and advocacy: organizations specifically oriented toward men’s engagement in caregiving professions and the care economy.** Specifically, little discussion or research focuses on men’s limited participation in childcare, elder care, and pre-K education or focuses on other care professions. Alongside this, little discussion exists around encouraging boys and young men to consider care-related professions, including health care professions.

**There is also relatively little research or advocacy about men’s overall equitable participation in care at home outside of the many voices of women who live the realities of men’s unequal participation in care work.** Large blind spots remain in some of the key structural and cultural narratives about care and caregiving and related to the need to promote and support men’s equitable participation in care of all kinds. No national vision or platform exists on achieving a US in which men and boys are encouraged, supported, enjoined, and obliged to carry out equal caregiving to women and girls; we also could not find any organization or platform that has this stated objective. (We invite any readers who feel the specific and intentional function of their own work falls into this category to [reach out](#) and help us correct this.)



*“We have a human service culture that focuses on the well-being of mothers and children, which creates a lack of incentive to engage and serve fathers.”*

## ADJACENT ISSUES IN THE FATHERHOOD AND MALE CAREGIVING SPACE

In addition to the clusters of programs and research focusing on fatherhood or caring/caregiving equality, other adjacent themes and specific groups are working on men's caregiving directly or indirectly. While we do not provide programmatic or organizational overviews for each of these here, suffice it to say organizations in these spaces can and must address fatherhood and men's caregiving if there is to be a comprehensive and transformative shift in how we embody the care economy in the US.

These adjacent themes, and their connections to men's caregiving, include:

- **Masculinities - Nurturing Masculinities and Men's Allyship for Gender Equality:** Some, but not all, of those interviewed for this research identified fatherhood's intersection with a need to reimagine masculinity as rooted in nurturance as opposed to strength, violence, or domination. National and well-known organizations – such as A Call to Men, the North American MenEngage Network, Futures Without Violence, MCSR, and Equimundo, to name just a few – are promoting healthy masculinities and men's allyship in achieving equality for women. On the political side of this territory, however, we find conservative traditionalists (including "men's rights" and "fathers' rights" advocates). Most of the fatherhood groups we spoke with said they had made a deliberate effort to distance themselves from "angry fathers" groups that take an oppositional, and often anti-women or anti-feminist, "fathers' rights" approach.
- **Family Maintenance/Restoration and Programs Focusing on the Diversity of Families and Kinship Networks:** This issue territory refers to work focused on restoring units of kinship and care that have been ruptured by histories of colonialism, racial injustice, and mass incarceration, as well as the evolution and dissolution of the "conventional" Western "nuclear family." Advocates and service providers centered here acknowledge variations of family structure, such as same-gender parents and divorced-but-co-parenting families. This territory of organizations also emphasizes the value of two-parent participation and the social cohesion believed to emerge from such family structures. Native-led

and Indigenous knowledge-informed organizations extend this idea even further, advocating for concepts of extended kinship that may challenge Western notions of what a "father" or "parent" even is. These organizations possess vast experience in building resilience and building on the cultural strengths of diverse ethnicities in the US, and they should be full partners in all the recommended actions in this report.

*“Caregiving is universal, even if biological parenthood is not.”*

- **Early Childhood Development/Child Welfare:** Many of those working in the fatherhood issue territory perceive child well-being and child development as an *outcome* of work done in other territories, and perhaps, an overarching goal. In the US, an enormous amount of work also occurs in the early childhood space that *does not involve fathers* in a specific or intentional way. Many of the largest child development networks and platforms – ranging from federal- and state-funded childcare and early childhood development initiatives to foster care systems to national-level professional networks on early childhood development and social work – have included some important discussions or initiatives to engage fathers and male caregivers. But such work is often adjacent to or distant from the specific fatherhood work mentioned earlier. This reality represents a potential connection point to many more stakeholders and resources than are currently involved in fatherhood work.

*“All of our work on fatherhood must keep the focus, ultimately, on the impact on children.”*

- Gender-Based Violence Prevention:** Many of the key interviewees we spoke with also see preventing gender-based violence as an *outcome* of their work, if not the center of it. Like early childhood development, there is – of course – extensive work being done to engage men in preventing gender-based or domestic violence, as well as a vast field of work with men who have carried out domestic violence, many of whom are fathers. This field also brings tremendous learning and potential connections on what can work to promote equitable, nonviolent parenting and fathering, as well as how to support families affected by domestic violence through restorative approaches rather than the carceral approaches that sometimes prevail.
  - Culture and Communications: Narrative Change in Media to Bring Visibility to Caregiving:** While there is a diverse ecosystem of “culture change” and “narrative strategy” organizations, particularly working from the progressive side of the US political spectrum, few of these organizations have demonstrable efforts on responsible/nurturing fatherhood or caregiving equality. Several of this report’s interviewees expressed the need for strategic, coordinated messaging, but there is also space here for more comprehensive cultural norm-building. The US has an enormous and influential media ecosystem, and we include this territory to point out how *little* of this sector’s work addresses fatherhood and men’s caregiving. Many organizations are in this space (including the Geena Davis Institute for Gender in Media, Caring Across Generations, the University of California, Los Angeles, Center for Scholars and Storytellers, The Representation Project, the Fair Play Policy Institute, and others), and they are discussing
- how to bring more diverse and authentic stories of caregiving and caregivers to TV and movies and how to promote a greater cultural narrative shift to center care and caregiving (and, to a lesser extent, to show men as capable caregivers). At the same time that we developed this landscape report, the Geena Davis Institute and Equipundo partnered to carry out the first-ever analysis of men’s caregiving in US TV ([Ashton et al., 2022](#)). The work that remains, however, is to integrate this analysis and advocacy into the norms of the US’s enormous and influential media industry.
- Public Health/Mental Health Advocacy and Service Organizations and Spirituality/Faith Groups:** These two adjacent territories are important to consider as well. Both include organizational work that can be integral to supporting men’s caregiving and advocating for fathers. In the case of spirituality/faith groups, we also learned that because direct fatherhood work is almost exclusively funded by the government, it is often kept separate from faith-based or spiritual work, which is disqualified from government funding in the US. At other times, some conservative faith-based organizations have pushed a heteronormative, marriage-only view of fatherhood without necessarily understanding and supporting the diversity of families and caregiving. Despite these political challenges, there are opportunities for greater inclusion of discussions about male caregiving within spirituality and faith-based organizations while creating dialogue across political lines. In addition, there are numerous, untapped opportunities for engaging or centering men’s caregiving within current discussions of men’s loneliness, men’s mental health – and the mental health of all.

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF FEDERAL AND STATE GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS<sup>2</sup>

Many aspects of fathers’ participation in the US are tied to the history of mass incarceration, particularly of Black and brown men, and of harmful child and family welfare policies. Partly responding to this reality, federal funding

for fatherhood-related work is derived from either the Department of Justice or HHS. Department of Justice funding goes toward programming in prisons and through courts, with an emphasis on child support enforcement. As noted earlier,

the dominant framework – responsible fatherhood – too often reflects a focus on fathers’ individual behaviors rather than the history of irresponsible policies that have shaped the lives of low-income families and fathers.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed overview of federal and state government engagement in fatherhood programming, refer to the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network’s 2018 brief *State Approaches to Including Fathers in Programs and Policies Dealing with Children and Families* ([Pearson, 2018](#)). [The network’s collection of fatherhood policy reports](#) is also the leading source of state-by-state details on policies and programs, and we recommended it for getting the lay of the land in any individual state.

***“We need to look at funding, not just the investments that aren’t being made. Some of the investments that are being made are destructive, such as over-policing [of men of color].”***

The bulk of the federal commitment to fatherhood support work comes from HHS and is small compared to funding for other social policy issues, even others within family and child welfare. The only intentional and dedicated funds for fatherhood work come out of the HHS’s Administration for Children and Families, through the Office of Head Start and the [National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse](#). These funds were first earmarked in 2005, and according to the interviewees for this document, they are currently just \$75 million per year for distribution to all US grantees – upwards of 40 large-scale organizations.

Describing the problem of intentionality in federal funding for fatherhood work and the limitations of that work, Kenneth Braswell, director of Fathers Incorporated and present administrator of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, says in a key informant interview, “There’s a difference between those whose organizational mission is fatherhood, as opposed to the vast majority of federal fatherhood grantees whose primary mission is to do something else and, ‘Oh, by the way, we work with fathers.’”

Federal funds are largely passed down to state-level and then county-level agencies for service provision or further distribution to local nongovernmental organizations. A bidding organization administers the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse as a federal contract. After the clearinghouse was founded in 2005, the [National Fatherhood Initiative](#) administered it for five years; the contract was then granted to [Fathers](#)

[Incorporated](#), which continues to administer the clearinghouse. Both of these organizations remain two of the biggest figures in the field and have shaped the responsible fatherhood framework through their respective terms as the clearinghouse’s administrators.

The National Fatherhood Initiative now centers its work not only on responsibility but on “involvement, responsibility, and commitment.” This is achieved by developing traits of “self-awareness, nurturing, and empathy”<sup>3</sup> in the fathers it works with. The National Fatherhood Initiative provides the US’s most widespread fatherhood curriculum, “24/7 Dad,” as well as “InsideOut Dad,” which specifically targets incarcerated parents. The initiative also maintains an extensive network of direct service providers at the local level and works with the Federal Bureau of Prisons, as well as numerous state corrections departments, distributing InsideOut Dad. Through these curricula, the National Fatherhood Initiative’s ‘involvement, responsibility, and commitment’ framework is pervasive in fatherhood programs around the country.

Each organization we spoke with approaches the topic of fathers’ *responsibility* slightly differently and also recognizes the limitations of this framing. And while *presence* and *providing* are always a part of the recipe, caregiving/nurturing is not always. Many of the organizations advocate for nurturing masculinity as strongly as they do for other aspects of responsibility; however, those organizational priorities are independently arrived at and not necessarily a part of their (federal funding-necessitated) alignment with responsible fatherhood. The missing piece here, perhaps, is to make caregiving/nurturing *inseparable* from responsibility.

***“Our goal is a government that can value people as humans and not solely as economic entities.”***

Government-funded directives on fathers and caregiving equality are small relative to the size of the country and the scope of the issue, and funding flows across a vast tributary system. The rest of the fatherhood program landscape is made up of disparate nonprofits and ad hoc organizations, academic researchers and research centers, think tanks, and a constellation of individual actors, often authoring their own publications or curricula and operating within fatherhood as independent entrepreneurs. Most organizations align with the responsible fatherhood framework and strive to receive federal funds; others, however, may supplement or even replace these funds with business models (independent authors, speakers, and entrepreneurs, for example) or funding from one of the small number of fatherhood-focused philanthropies in the US (the Annie E Casey Foundation probably being preeminent among them).

***“There is a lack of infrastructure in the field, well beyond just a lack of funding.”***

Another key network in fatherhood programming, Ascend at the Aspen Institute (in partnership with the Good+ Foundation), focuses on coupling state-run child support agencies with more supportive fatherhood programming. Thirteen states have adopted some of Ascend’s recommendations and are actively working to bring more fatherhood engagement into their child support enforcement work. Ohio, in particular, is held up as a leader in fatherhood engagement work, as it is unique in having a state-level Commission on Fatherhood; this commission is led by Kimberly Dent, who has been active in coordinating fatherhood engagement work on a county-by-county basis.

3 from key informant interviews

# 4

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## OVERALL REFLECTIONS ON THE US FATHERHOOD PROGRAMMING LANDSCAPE



The overarching theme of this landscape is one of scattered heterogeneity, with clusters of practitioners in proximity to one another but often disconnected or even unaware of other clusters working in other communities or geographies. The racial, class-based, and political divisions prevalent throughout American society are also reflected in the fatherhood landscape.

**Black-led organizations and other people of color (POC)-led organizations represent much of the longest-serving, most experienced, and most accomplished leadership in US fatherhood programs.** This is largely due to the legacy of poverty and mass incarceration of men of color in the US, which has contributed so significantly to the father absence crisis first reported in the 1990s and which has left communities of color most obviously in need of structural support to repair the damage done to their families and conceptions of masculinity and fatherhood.

*“We need a paradigm shift in how Black and brown dads are treated by our institutions. Replacing the stigma of being a dad of color into one where they are treated with more respect, dignity, and worth.”*

**Middle-class and mostly white-led organizations – with some notable exceptions – have tended to take the form of ad hoc communities.** Several mutual support networks have arisen in this way (and were bolstered by the parenting pressures of the pandemic), with organizers subsequently introducing practical fatherhood advocacy and structured curricula or convenings. Work remains to help these organizations find common cause with the Black-led and other POC-led networks described in the previous paragraph, often because the needs of their respective constituencies seem, on the surface, to be so divergent. Work also remains among organizations with largely white constituencies in navigating their introduction of equality-minded or pro-feminist ideas or programming.

In a reflection of the divisive US political climate, interviewees in white-led or predominantly white organizations reported that by taking a pro-feminist stance or even leveling a critique of

dominant masculinity, several organizations risk fragmentation along political lines, leading to splinter groups of dads who gravitate toward patriarchal views of fatherhood, white male grievance, or “fathers’ rights” and “men’s rights.” The common language, and even common origins, of pro-feminist and what we might call ‘manhood traditionalist’ segments make the terrain fraught for any feminist organizations seeking to collaborate or align themselves in supporting fathers. In fact, one of our interviewees reported that a sizable portion of their work is simply helping women-led and pro-feminist organizations *tell the difference* between feminist and anti-feminist fatherhood groups.

**In discussing gaps and overlooked areas in fatherhood work, we must also center the work being done by Native American fatherhood advocates** and those working in rural and exurban places. Here, the legacies of colonialism, displacement, and



economic inequality shape the needs of fathers and those who are working to support them. Aspects of the responsible fatherhood framework certainly apply here, but prominent Native fatherhood advocates, such as the Native American Fatherhood & Families Association, observe that cultural and spiritual work is required to repair the damage to fatherhood (and family-hood, by extension) historically done by colonialist expansion. According to the Native American Fatherhood & Families Association, this is challenging in a trickle-down government funding structure, which ultimately prohibits funds from going to what non-Native institutions perceive to be “faith-based” work. Here, we see a number of possibly false binaries that affect what kind of support organizations can provide to fathers: between culture and spirituality, between genders, and also between a rigidity imposed by Western tradition and the nature of evidence.

**Our interviews with diverse stakeholders found deep tensions between practitioners and researchers.** Indeed, we heard numerous critiques that the existing research on fatherhood in the US is insufficiently grounded in – or carried out in partnership with – direct service organizations. On the one hand, it costs money to generate evidence of efficacy, above and beyond what it costs to provide support services and sometimes in competition with fundraising for direct service provision; in many cases, funding streams are made

available for research and evidence-based programming. On the other hand, several direct service providers possess years of practice-based learning that is not recognized or accepted as research or evidence. Behind the debates around what constitutes evidence and who owns research is a deeper reckoning in the US around the legacies of colonialism and Western empirical traditions within an academic landscape, which are largely responsible for the value hierarchy of knowledge within which evidence is considered. These tensions point to another way in which a national network could promote dialogue.

**There is still much to be done to bridge the territories of fatherhood work and women-led work to center the care economy.** This includes advocating for family leave policies, studying work/life participation, supporting paid care workers, and campaigning for a reimagined economy of labor – work already begun by the feminist and women-led organizations highlighted earlier. A major part of engaging men in the care economy must be forging trustworthy connections across these historically imposed divisions between races, classes, and genders. We also see that triangulating with important work done by early childhood development/child welfare organizations creates considerable opportunity to forge common cause on behalf of children in the US in order to transcend these divisions.

*“We tend to think in binaries. The gender binary itself is part of patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy.”*



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## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Men's participation as caregivers – of children, of older adults, of others in their homes and lives – has never been more urgent. With the impact of COVID, women's job losses have been disproportionate to men's largely due to the challenge of balancing paid work with unpaid care work. During COVID, women of color dropped out of the labor force at even higher rates than white women, especially women of color with children ([Kochhar, 2020](#)). And while men in the US have gradually taken on a greater share of the unpaid care work, the most recent national data on time use – the 2021 American Time Use Survey – shows that women perform unpaid household and care work an average of 5.1 hours per day compared with 4.1 hours for men ([US Bureau of Labor Statistics \[BLS\], n.d.](#)). This inequality in care work holds across income and education levels.

This inequality increased during COVID. A nationally representative survey found that 64 percent of men and 55 percent of women said care work increased during COVID-19, with about a third saying it increased by at least three hours per week. At the same time, it was found that 68 percent of fathers felt closer or much closer to their children since the pandemic began ([Oxfam, Equimundo, & MenCare, 2020](#)).

**The conclusion is that there have never been so many men doing so much hands-on care work in the US – even as women continue to do more of it, with personal costs including curtailment of professional goals and exhaustion. But the care work men are doing is increasing a cherished sense of presence in their children's lives.**

**The landscape of fatherhood and men's caregiving we've described is rugged and parched, riven with structures that separate and isolate communities that might share values and aspirations but that find it difficult to forge lasting connections with one another.** And while there are many aspects to fatherhood and men's evolving role in US society, we see caregiving as the underlying bedrock of the whole environment. Caregiving is the common denominator of a diverse field devoted to achieving care equality; improving men's health, happiness, well-being, and sense of purpose; and engaging men in the civic participation required to advocate for the care economy – all with implications and positive outcomes for families, children, women, and society.

With this in mind, we recommend:

- **Building a coordinated effort to infuse the funding system with significantly greater resources, whether that is from government or the philanthropic sectors, and to do so with *intentionality* toward fatherhood and care equality. At the same time, we must ensure that these resources reach all regions of the issue landscape and that communities are not disqualified due to cultural divisions or structural biases.**
- **Enhancing and creating mutual learning networks, through convenings and collective knowledge-gathering and dissemination. This includes amplifying the important work already being done, as well as tightening the cohesion between research and practice in the fatherhood field.**
- **Coordinating the development of cultural narratives encouraging commonly held values of caregiving, the importance of fathers, and the role of men in building equitable systems, with support and infrastructure for disseminating these narratives to key media and content producers and to organizations that seek to influence media content production.**
- **Conducting ongoing monitoring of fatherhood-related policies in the US, and monitoring cultural and social norms, to ensure our collective work is properly directed, and over a longer term, to detect its influence.**
- **Activating the corporate and private sectors in the US to an even greater extent than at present. As examples of corporate action already happening in this space, internationally and in the US, P&G has been actively involved in promoting care equality by supporting NGOs and key influencers. Unilever's Dove Men+Care brand has also been a leader in this space and has put its name beyond paternity leave including creating, before COVID, the Global Corporate Parental Leave Task Force, co-led by Equimundo, which brought together several major, international corporations interested in equitable parental leave policies and specifically to supporting male caregivers - alongside female caregivers - in having access to paid leave and taking that leave. Considering the sizable gaps specific to the US, there is much more**

**to be done, in how they present fatherhood and men's caregiving in their advertising, how they implement parental leave in their workplaces and how they manifest as allies for national advocacy on parental leave and other care-related legislation.**

- **Engaging men in the "citizenship of care" – including raising awareness of legislation at the local, state, and national levels; studying and monitoring men's voting when it comes to these issues; and engaging men as allies on care policies (in voting and in their workplaces).**

We believe that by bringing together actors in these various territories, helping them learn from one another, helping identify shareable values and resources, and amplifying their collective work, we can make the urgently needed paradigm shift in men's participation in the US economy of care.

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Native American Fatherhood & Families Association

**Joe Jones,**  
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