

Alternative to incarceration for low-income non-custodial parents

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, low-income non-custodial parents in the USA, primarily fathers, are at risk of incarceration for failure to make child support payments, clogging the prison system, preventing already at-risk fathers from holding a job and removing them from relationships with their children. This paper examines an innovative programme in one south-eastern state that provides an alternative to incarceration for non-compliant parents, also allowing fathers an opportunity to find gainful employment; to learn valuable life skills; and to establish healthier relationships with their children. Data analysis from 3 years of programme implementation suggests that low-income non-custodial fathers enrolled in the Alternative to Incarceration programme have a much greater chance to fulfil their obligations, both as wage earners and as parents, when they are in a programme that provides life skills, helps them find employment and provides other supports to help them improve their life situation rather than incarcerating them for non-payment of child support. Furthermore, this programme represents a substantial cost savings to the state, as hundreds of fathers have remained outside of the prison system. To date, this alternative to incarceration is a promising solution to a previously intractable problem.

INTRODUCTION

In the USA, with heightened federal and state enforcement of child support agreements, incarceration is an increasingly possible consequence to not paying child support (Huang *et al.* 2005). The threat of incarceration for non-payment of child support may be a deterrent for fathers who are not making their payments but have the money to pay. However, for individuals who cannot afford to pay both child support and their most basic living expenses, the threat becomes a reality because the resources are not available to make their payments. Furthermore, incarceration does not improve a father's ability to pay; rather, it pushes him further behind, disconnects him from his children and increases the overall cost to society.

It is a significant challenge to develop a cost-effective method to collect child support from low-income non-custodial parents that does not increase their debt, worsen their opportunities for employment or further disengage them from their children. It can be even more challenging when one considers the range of risk factors that impacts low-income fathers' ability to provide for their children financially and emotionally. This paper presents a cost-effective Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) model developed and implemented in South Carolina that keeps low-income non-custodial fathers from incarceration for delinquent child support payments and provides support by preparing them for and securing employment. The aims of this paper are to present an alternative to incarceration for low-income non-violent non-custodial fathers that will provide them with

supports to find employment, pay their child support and help address issues that prevent them from being good fathers; and to show the cost-effectiveness and benefits of the model vs. incarceration for non-payment of child support. The paper contributes to the literature by addressing the problem of non-payment of child support for low-income fathers who are unable to meet their financial obligations from the perspective of not just focusing on the child support payments but also providing supports to deal with issues that are barriers to them fulfilling their financial obligations and emotional relationship with their children.

BACKGROUND

For most men, fulfilling their obligations to provide for their children financially is a powerful expectation (Marsiglio *et al.* 2000). However, given the relatively high rates of unemployment for both African-American (9.8%) and Latino (7.6%) men, being involved with their families while successfully providing for them is often difficult (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008). Sorensen & Zibman (2001) reported that of the nearly 11 million non-custodial fathers in the USA, only 36% pay formal child support. Of those who did not pay child support, 2.5 million or 23% were poor themselves. Of these 2.5 million poor non-custodial fathers, 60% were members of a racial or ethnic minority group, 42% had not finished high school, and their average age was 34 years old.

On a state level, Saltzman & Steirer (2005) conducted an analysis of cost-of-living expenses for individuals in South Carolina. The results indicated that to provide the most basic necessities, such as housing and food, a single adult had to earn a minimum of \$7.00 per hour for 40 hours a week. The vast majority of child support debt is owed by individuals who earn far less than this per month. The Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement reports that of the more than \$105 billion in child support debt nationally, 70% is owed by non-custodial parents who have no quarterly earnings or who have annual earnings of less than \$10 000 (US Department of Health and Human Services 2008). Only 4% of child support arrears are held by non-custodial parents with more than \$40 000 in annual income (May & Roulet 2005).

In a joint research study conducted by Duke University and University of Wisconsin, researchers came to a similar conclusion:

All of the analyses suggest that fathers were contributing to the support of their children if they had the means to do so. There

is little evidence of deadbeat dads – fathers who choose not to support. Incarceration, unemployment, and lack of resources were the primary explanations for low levels of support. (Magnuson 2006, pp. 32–33).

Incarcerating low-income men for non-payment of child support further prevents them from fulfilling their obligations as fathers. The South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families (SCCFF) conducted a survey that illustrated that with all detention centre facilities in the state of South Carolina, the average length of stay for an inmate incarcerated for non-payment of child support was 6 months (L. Potts, South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families, Columbia, unpublished data). Child support orders cannot be modified while a father is incarcerated. As a result, the child support obligation continues to be owed each month and the debt continues to accrue. Turetsky (2007) reported that fathers typically enter prison owing approximately \$10 000 in debt and leave owing \$20 000 or more because the debt continues to accumulate. This larger debt makes it even more difficult for them to meet their child support obligation when released. Therefore, fathers exit the detention centre owing more than they did when they left, with no more employment skills than when they entered. Many fathers lose their housing, transportation and other assets they were able to acquire. Additionally, securing or maintaining employment with a criminal record presents significant challenges for the father. For this reason, within a short period of time they find themselves again ruled into court for non-payment of child support and incarcerated.

Alternative sentencing options, such as work release and home detention, usually are not viable solutions for low-income fathers. Work release is an option only if the inmate has both a job and an employer who is willing to complete extensive work-release paperwork. Low-income individuals often do not hold jobs where the employer values their specific skills enough to accommodate work-release requirements. If work hours or travel requirements conflict with work-release hours, then the inmate cannot participate. Work release does not eliminate prison overcrowding issues because the inmate must report back to jail each evening. With work release, 100% of the paycheck is garnished. If the inmate has children to support other than the child involved in the child support case, which many do, these children suffer financially during his period of incarceration, and the father's ability to see all of his children is interrupted for an extended period of time. Home detention for the low-income father is a less viable option than work release

as the programmes charge high monitoring fees to utilize their services but offer no employment or other services to the father. Most low-income fathers cannot meet the expenses for any period of time and are re-incarcerated within a few months.

The ATI programme presented in this paper provides a model that help low-income fathers find employment and addresses other risk factors by helping fathers acquire a variety of life skills, including parenting, communicating effectively, building healthy relationships, building support systems and developing effective decision-making skills. The model allows fathers the opportunity to strengthen and improve their lives so that they are better able to improve their life situation, fulfil their child support obligations and have contact with their children rather than sitting in jail accruing more arrearages on a debt they are unable to pay.

DIVERSION PROGRAMMES

Although financial instability and low educational achievement are two of the major barriers low-income fathers face in making consistent child support payments, they are not the only obstacles faced by these fathers. An analysis of data from the South Carolina statewide fatherhood initiative's fatherhood programmes over the past 10 years showed that the majority of low-income fathers who seek services from the fatherhood initiative programmes lack connections to their communities, do not have positive peer support networks, have some criminal background and are unmarried, with ongoing relationship conflicts that result in poor family support (I. Luckey, University of South Carolina – Institute for Families in Society, Columbia, SC, unpublished data). These are risk factors that impact the ability of the low-income father to consistently provide ongoing financial and emotional support for their children. It is important for any community-based alternative sentencing programme to address adequately all of these risk factors if positive outcomes are to be achieved (Warren 2007).

Non-Custodial Parents (NCP) Choices, an alternative sentencing programme, was a pilot programme administered by the Texas Workforce Commission and the Office of the Attorney General's Child Support Division. NCP Choices focused on increasing the income of non-custodial parents who were behind on their child support. The programme showed that 'placing a greater emphasis on low-income, non-custodial fathers is an effective strategy to lift families out

of poverty and improve child well-being' (Hagert 2009, p. 1). Programme participants' child support payments increased by 51% under the NCP Choices programme. Participants in the NCP programme were court ordered to attend the employment programme that provided employment readiness, training and assistance securing employment (Hagert 2009). Although this programme increased child support payments and provided employment services, it did not offer services that addressed the other risk factors low-income fathers face.

In 1995, the Florida Legislature in Pinellas, Pasco and Hillsborough Counties established another alternative sentencing programme called the Non-Custodial Parent Employment Program (NCEP) as a pilot project targeting unemployed and underemployed non-custodial parents with children who received public assistance but were not making their child support payments. The goal of NCEP was to reduce the amount of welfare (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) paid out because of non-support, and to increase the amount of court-ordered child support collected. The participants were court ordered into the programme and assisted with obtaining and maintaining unsubsidized employment, which helped them establish a pattern of regular child support payments. Traditional education and training programmes were bypassed and participants were encouraged to obtain paid employment as quickly as possible. They were required to be continuously employed for 6 months to complete the programme. The programme provided job placement and close monitoring services. Additionally, the programme helped fathers increase the frequency and quality of contact with their children, which were a major benefit of the programme (Gulf Coast Jewish Family Services, Inc. 2008). However, NCEP still did not address many other risk factors that have been found to impact a man's ability to successfully provide for his children (Warren 2007).

ATI MODEL

In South Carolina, the SCCFF developed an ATI model in 2004, initially implementing it as a two-year pilot programme. The need for the programme emerged through the experiences of fatherhood programmes serving low-income non-custodial fathers in the state of South Carolina. As low-income fathers voluntarily came into the fatherhood programmes to become more engaged, active and supportive fathers, programme staff frequently found men who could not

achieve success because they risked incarceration for non-payment of child support, even if they entered the programme without a bench warrant for non-payment of child support. The fathers' delinquent child support payment histories were directly related to their employment histories, which typically consisted of multiple short-term stints of employment in low-paying jobs, frequent periods of unemployment, low educational levels and lack of job skills. Once incarcerated and released, the fathers, now with criminal records, found it even more difficult to secure employment. At the same time, their child support arrears continued to grow during their incarceration.

The Director of Policy for SCCFF worked closely with the state and local Department of Social Services Child Support Enforcement Division, a county Family Court, and a local detention centre to develop a model to provide courts with an alternative sentence for non-violent, low-income fathers at risk of incarceration for non-payment of child support. The ATI component allows judges to order fathers to attend a 24-week fatherhood programme that will assist them with finding employment so that they can pay their child support obligations.

Employment is an essential part of the ATI component. A father mandated into the fatherhood programme as an ATI participant must be or become employed so that he can fulfil his child support obligation. A job recruiter screens the father for job readiness, determines what training or education is needed to secure liveable wage employment and assists the father with securing employment. The job recruiter meets with major employers in the area to foster a relationship and negotiate the hiring of potential participants. Each programme site has one dedicated ATI coordinator for court appearances and monitoring child support payments.

PROGRAMME PROCEDURES

Pathways into the programme

Fathers enter the ATI programme at two points:

1. a contempt hearing; and
2. a review hearing following incarceration.

Entry point 1

The preferred entry point is at a contempt hearing, which allows the father an immediate opportunity to receive assistance in finding employment. When a father is court ordered to a fatherhood programme as

an ATI participant, the fatherhood programme staff is present at the hearing to determine if he is eligible for the programme. Then, a Consent Order ordering the defendant into the programme is signed by the defendant, the child support attorney, the fatherhood representative and the presiding judge. Entering an ATI programme at the point of the contempt hearing allows a father to avoid incarceration. If a low-income father is unemployed at the contempt hearing, the fatherhood programme staff will request that the defendant have 30 days to seek and secure employment, and 45 days to make his first child support payment.

Entry point 2

The second entry point requires the judge to sentence the father and then state in the contempt order that the defendant can be interviewed at the detention centre by the fatherhood programme staff. If he is deemed eligible for the fatherhood programme as an ATI participant, a review hearing will be scheduled. Notice of the review hearing date must be given to Child Support Enforcement and to the detention centre to allow proper transport of the father to the hearing. Entry into the fatherhood programme as an ATI participant at this point is not the preferred method because these fathers have been incarcerated and often have even more barriers (e.g. loss of transportation, housing, job and more debt, etc.) to gaining employment and paying their child support.

A criminal background check is conducted at court on all potential participants prior to them being ordered into the programme to verify that criminal history meets eligibility criteria. Particular attention is paid to the criminal domestic violence record, as the programme does not want to reconnect potentially dangerous fathers with their children or the custodial parent.

Eligibility requirements

To be eligible for participation in the fatherhood programme as a court-ordered (ATI) participant, a man must meet the following criteria:

- is a low-income father, over 18 years of age, with children under 18 years of age;
- demonstrates that during the period of missed child support payments, he was unemployed, underemployed, laid off, medically unable to work or faced other circumstances that prevented consistent payment of child support;

- demonstrates that he has no current criminal charges pending;
- documents that he has completed a valid treatment programme for any criminal domestic violence (CDV) charge on his record. No more than one CDV charge is acceptable to be a participant in the programme;
- presents himself as free of any serious alcohol or drug addiction; and
- indicates a desire to play an active role in the life of his child.

If a man meets the eligibility criteria, he must consent to participate in the 24-week fatherhood programme as an ATI participant and comply with all programme requirements. The minimum requirements while in the programme include:

- attending all weekly fatherhood peer support sessions;
- following all fatherhood programme recommendations related to securing liveable wage employment, including attending General Education Development classes if necessary, employment training and interviews, and related drug screens;
- Gaining employment and beginning to make child support payments within 45 days of being court ordered into the programme;
- Consistently paying child support and arrearage payments while in the programme; and
- Maintaining current home and work address, and telephone numbers with both the Clerk of Court and the Fatherhood Program.

The weekly peer-support meetings and sessions cover topics such as parenting and co-parenting, job readiness/employment, healthy relationships, effective communication, men's health, financial management and grounding the inner man.

When a father completes the fatherhood programme, his jail sentence is satisfied. However, if he fails to comply with programme requirements, the programme staff will forward an *Affidavit of Non-Compliance* to the Clerk of Court stipulating wherein the father has failed to comply. The Clerk will then issue a bench warrant for the arrest of the father.

PROGRAMME EVALUATION METHODS

Each ATI-participating fatherhood programme is a part of the South Carolina statewide Fatherhood Initiative. Each programme provides the same services, and follows the same structure and programming protocols for operating their fatherhood programmes, and for collecting, storing and reporting data. Two pro-

gramme sites serve counties that are predominantly rural and the others serve counties that are a combination of rural and urban. In the first year, there were seven programme sites that participated for the entire year. In the second year, there were nine programme sites of which two were new start-up programmes that began late in the year and received minimal funding. Two programmes closed, resulting in a total of seven programme sites in the third year. The University of South Carolina – Institute for Families in Society (IFS), contracted by the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families, monitors and evaluates fatherhood initiative programmes across South Carolina, including the ATI programme. The University of South Carolina's Institutional Review Board has approved the protocol for evaluation of the project.

Analyses

Data collected at intake include demographic characteristics, employment history, living situation, primary relationships including all children, history with the criminal justice and child support systems. Information about the court-ordered child support payments and amounts of arrears are received from courts. The amount of wages and wage withholdings are received from the fathers and verified through official earnings and wage withholding records. Verification of each participant's history with the criminal justice system is verified through a criminal background check. Programme staff enters the information into an Access database (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, USA), and the de-identified data are sent electronically each month to IFS. Attendance at the mandatory weekly group sessions are tracked through each man's signature on the attendance roster for each session to ensure that the participant is complying with the court order.

Data analyses were based on the information gathered from intake information, monthly reports, wage withholding verification, court records for payment of child support and group sessions that meet every week. Excel (Microsoft Corporation) and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences were used to generate basic descriptive and some differential statistics (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). The results provide tools through which accountability to the courts, Department of Social Services, the public and funders are generated.

Qualitative data

Qualitative data were collected from the fathers through face-to-face interviews and participant

satisfaction surveys. One-on-one, face-to-face interviews with a staff member were held in an environment familiar to the fathers. The purpose was to assess how well the programme addressed their needs. A satisfaction survey was administered at the end of the first 3 months and at the end of 6 months. Most of the questions were closed ended because of the literacy level of the men. The fathers were allowed to complete the survey in private, but if necessary, someone was available to read the survey to them. Additionally, there were open-ended questions that encouraged them to express their overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the programme and whether they would recommend it to other fathers.

One-on-one interviews were conducted face-to-face with some mothers of the children. In most cases, the mothers were not accessible to the programme staff. However, the programmes have certified mediators on staff that met with the mothers, if they agreed, to work around issues that would allow the fathers to be more involved in their children's lives. The mothers were informed prior to the interview of its purpose.

Conversations with partners, i.e. child support officials, law enforcement, judges and programme directors, were face-to-face and via telephone. The purpose was to get their feedback on the effectiveness of the programme from the perspective of their organization or institution. Permission to use their statements and identify them was granted. Consent to use information from the fathers and mothers were granted. Anonymity of the parents was ensured.

Study participants

Table 1 provides demographic information on the 1509 men who were ATI participants during the 3-year period, 2006–08, reported in this paper.

The data show that many of the men lacked adequate vocational and educational training to fill better-paying positions that exacerbated the challenge of finding a job. Additionally at intake, 12% of the fathers self-reported that drug and alcohol addictions were challenges that consequently provided obstacles to gaining and holding a job. In summary, the demographic characteristics of the ATI participants in Table 1 mirrors the Huang *et al.*'s (2005) description of the tendency of low-income non-custodial fathers to be young, undereducated, unmarried, with minimal work experience, and prone to having alcohol and drug problems.

Table 1 Participants' demographics

Programme participants	
Race (%)	
African-American	76
Caucasian	21
Median age (years)	33
Marital status (%)	
Never married	48
Married	30
Divorced	22
Education (%)	
Did not graduate high school	38
Graduated high school or GED	53
Post-secondary education	9
Employment status at intake (%)	
Unemployed	52
Employed	48
Income did not meet basic needs (%)	33
Participants' children	
Average number of children	2
Median age (years)	8
Living arrangements (%)	
With mother	77
With father (at least one child)	10

FINDINGS

Based upon the 2-year pilot programme, it was projected that 280 fathers would be court ordered into the ATI component of the fatherhood programme per year from the seven selected sites. The results show that the demand for the programme outweighed the projections. Family Court Judges, who were very pleased to have another option besides incarceration for the low-income population that repeatedly came before them for non-payment of child support, ordered many more participants into the programmes than anticipated. Each year enrolment more than doubled the anticipated enrolment numbers.

Table 2 presents 3-year performance data of the ATI programme.

The termination rate of 21% (317 participants) over 3 years was within the anticipated attrition rate for work with this targeted population, based on our experience with the pilot programme. The termination rate continued to decrease slightly each year: 24% year 1, 20% year 2 and 19% in year 3. The primary reasons for termination were that the fathers wanted employment but did not want to participate in other required aspects of the fatherhood programme. Other reasons were some did not follow through with keeping their one-on-one sessions with the fatherhood staff; some had issues with substance abuse; some never came to the programme after they were

Table 2 Alternative to Incarceration participants' performance for 3 years

	Year 1 July 2006–June 2007 <i>n</i>	Year 2 July 2007–June 2008 <i>n</i>	Year 3 July 2008–June 2009 <i>n</i>
Programme participants	491	536	482
Graduated participants	172	270	170
Terminated participants	123	116	99
Participants in compliance with programme requirements	368	420	390
	\$	\$	\$
Amount earned in gross wages	2 293 355	2 860 698	1 778 462
Amount paid in ongoing child support	317 307	479 822	382 919
Amount paid in child support arrears	94 201	117 787	77 483

mandated to the programme; a few were not able to obtain a job, and some judges mandated fathers to the programmes who were not eligible. Another contributing factor to the termination rate, especially during the first year, was that at the onset of the programme, staff had to coordinate the screening of participants into the programme during ongoing court proceedings. A few judges ordered participants into the programme prior to proper screening by programme staff, which included running a criminal background check. The programme staff met with the judges and corrected the issue by clarifying the importance of screening prior to the individual being court ordered. In all cases where termination occurred, the court was notified of participants' termination for non-compliance with programme requirements. Those terminated served their original sentence in the detention centre.

The number of men who completed the programme by the end of the third year was 612 (55%). This is important because many fathers did not have a history of follow-through in situations that they were confronted with in the programme, such as paying their child support, participating in weekly programme meetings and meeting milestones towards completion of the programme.

Child support payment

The ATI programme was successful in increasing father fulfilment of their child support obligations. Over the 3-year period, \$1 180 048 was paid in ongoing child support, and \$289 471 was paid to reduce their child support arrears. The overall earnings of the fathers in the ATI programme were \$6 932 515. Many (52%) of these fathers were unemployed before entering the programme. See Table 2 for the financial breakdown per year.

One criterion for participation in the ATI programme is that child support is paid on a consistent basis. Wage withholding along with verification with the Clerk of Court records assure that child support payments are being made consistently and on time. Thus, all of the men who have jobs, or once they secure a job within 45 days after being mandated into the ATI programme, paid their child support consistently.

Cost-effectiveness

Table 3 shows the cost of operating an ATI programme for 6 months vs. incarcerating a father for non-payment of child support for 6 months.

The table shows that the ATI programme is cost-effective; the cost to operate the seven ATI programmes for the first and third years was \$575 000 and \$573 000. The second year, which included two additional programme sites (9), raised the cost to \$585 000. The equivalent cost to incarcerate the 368 low-income fathers in South Carolina during the first year would have been \$2 760 000, \$3 360 000 for 420 low-income fathers the second year and \$3 120 000 for 390 men for the third year. These data are based on the number of men who completed or continued to comply with the programme who would have served time had they not been enrolled in the ATI programme. The average length of stay in a detention centre for non-payment of child support was 6 months (L. Potts, South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families, Columbia, unpublished data). The Department of Corrections reported that the cost to incarcerate an individual for 1 year in South Carolina is \$15 000, which means that the savings to taxpayers in not incarcerating the ATI participants was \$7500 per father (J. Ozmint 2007, unpublished data).

Table 3 Cost benefit assessment of Alternative to Incarceration programmes

	Year 1 July 2006–June 2007 \$	Year 2 July 2007–June 2008 \$	Year 3 July 2008–June 2009 \$
Cost			
Cost to incarcerate 368 men for 6 months	2 760 000		
Cost to incarcerate 420 men for 6 months*		3 360 000	
Cost to incarcerate 390 men for 6 months			3 120 000
Cost to operate 7 programmes for 12 months	575 000		
Cost to operate 9 programmes for 12 months†		585 000	
Cost to operate 7 programmes for 12 months			573 000
Total cost savings	2 185 000	2 775 000	2 547 000
Benefits			
Total gross earnings of participants	2 293 355	2 860 698	1 778 462‡
Total amount of child support paid	411 508	597 609	460 402
Total benefit to participating families and society	2 704 863	3 458 307	2 238 864
Total savings and benefits to families and society	4 889 863	6 233 307	4 785 864

*The South Carolina Department of Corrections reported an increase in costs to \$8000 per inmate from a 6-month detention.

†In year 2, there were nine programmes, while in years 1 and 3, there were seven programmes; the two additional programmes in year 2 were start-up programmes that began late in the year and received minimal funding.

‡The economic climate in 2008 markedly reduced the amount of gross earnings for participants.

Most participants who are court ordered to the ATI programme would not have qualified for work release and would have lost the employment they had on the day of the court hearing. Instead, participants who already had jobs kept them, and 258 men actually increased their earnings while in the programme. Over the 3-year period, the 1171 individuals who were not terminated from the programme earned total gross earnings while in the programme of \$7 782 125.

Table 3 shows a decline in the numbers for year 3. The decline reflects the downturn in the economy. The unemployment rate in South Carolina is characteristically higher than the national average. In two counties of participating ATI programmes, the unemployment rate during the third year ranged between 17% and 15%. The remaining counties' unemployment rates ranged between 11% and 8% during that same period. Additionally, during this period, it became apparent that the original deadline for the men to get a job, 30 days, was not realistic especially for the population.

Non-fiscal benefits

Data analyses showed that 43% of the ATI participants responded at intake that they had no relationship to a somewhat hostile relationship with the mother of their children. While in the programme, 31% reported that with the help of the programme their relationship had improved. Additionally, upon

entering the programme, 49% of the 1509 men reported having little to no contact with their children. However, while in the programme, 55% reported having contacts or increased contact with their child or children. Although generally, very few fathers tend to write comments on questionnaires or surveys, 4% wrote comments on their participant satisfaction survey indicating that their relationships with their children and with the mother of their children had improved with the help of the programme. Staff's observations at interactional family events sponsored by the programmes indicated that relations that were very strained initially were less strained.

DISCUSSION

The ATI component of the statewide fatherhood programme in South Carolina has demonstrated successful outcomes. The South Carolina programme stands apart from other ATI programmes because of its holistic approach to fathers. The needs of the men are met economically, in that they secure employment and make child support payments and also in other ways, as they learn other life skills that help them become engaged and supportive fathers. Notably, the ATI programme in South Carolina already has had an impact on lowering the incarceration for non-payment of child support in its already overcrowded prisons. Wildeman (2009) has reported that there are a disproportionate number of low-income minority males

in prison. This programme has promise to contribute to a reduction of these numbers.

Feedback received about the programme from those involved as part of the evaluation process helped in maintaining contact with judges and other officials to see what their perceptions of the fatherhood programme are. It is critical to have buy-in from these community members. For example, the head officer of the Charleston County Detention Center Work Camp recently noted, 'In the past we tried just finding employment but quickly learned that almost all of these men have multiple issues. The Fatherhood programmes with the ATI component are a great tool to help the Detention Center lower its population and reduce the recidivism rate.' (L. Potts, conversation with Lt B. Keyes, January 2008)

Building and nurturing strong relationships with various agencies, institutions and systems are core contributing elements for success of the ATI component. Close work and coordination with Family Court judges, clerks of court in the Family Court system, Department of Social Services Child Support Enforcement, state and regional child support directors, and the employment and business sectors are necessary to have sufficient buy-in, access and support to implement the programme. Regular contact with judges and other officials are maintained to keep abreast of their perceptions of the fatherhood programme, ensuring that the programme is mutually beneficial to each of the sectors as it lowers incarceration for non-payment of child support, increases the collection of child-support payments and provides workers for jobs that may not have been easily filled. One Family Court judge has observed, 'As an administrative judge and speaking for the Family Court judges in Charleston County, we believe that the Father to Father Program in North Charleston has been an excellent programme that has helped fathers consistently pay their child support in lieu of being incarcerated.' (L. Potts, conversation with Judge Judy Bridges McMahon, September 2007)

The ability to find work is a central part of the ATI component. Without work to pay their child support, the father will be incarcerated. The recent downturn of the economy makes finding employment for participants increasingly challenging. More time and effort is needed to focus on benefits to employers to hire programme participants as well as helping potential employers meet their needs. To address this challenge, creative strategies must be developed to help men find work. Developing strong relationships with the workforce investment agencies, the one-stop

offices and technical colleges is important. Special efforts may be needed to find employers that have the flexibility to hire men who may not have a clean criminal history. Finding specific incentives for employers and providing assistance with the paperwork involved with getting incentives is necessary, especially for small business owners. Researching emerging markets and helping fathers get the training needed to fill those jobs is important. As the court order only gives a short window of time for the father to find a job, the programme needs to continue to work with judges to see if they are willing to extend that time if the father is in a job training programme that will enable him to get a job with a liveable wage. Agreements need to be made with the training programmes to provide some fast-track training classes, e.g. offer welding certification training classes for 20 days with longer hours vs. 90 days with shorter hours per training session.

Consistent child support payments can help in opening doors for fathers to improved relations with the mothers of their children. Fatherhood staff indicated that the lack of consistent child support payments was a major area of conflict that caused tension between the mother and the father especially when it came to allowing him to see their child. In many cases, they were able to help mediate the situations once the fathers began to show a pattern of consistent child support payments. Receiving the payments not only provided financial assistance but also allowed the mothers to be more open to allowing the fathers to see their child(ren). The staff reported that some mothers began to recognize and trust some changes he was making in his life to become a more responsible father. Changes in the fathers' behaviours were witnessed by children as well. The son of one participant, a 9-year-old, shared his observations with staff about the impact of the programme on his dad's behaviour by saying that since his dad started in the fatherhood programme, he had become dependable and worthy of other people's confidence. Western & Wildeman (2009) reported that incarceration alters the life course that may not only affect the men and their life course, but be passed on from one generation to the next. The ATI programme provides opportunities and supports to help stop the perpetuating cycle.

The non-fiscal benefits to children from fathers not being incarcerated and being mandated to the ATI programme allow opportunity for fathers to work on parenting and relational skills while fulfilling their financial obligations to their children. The fathers' involvement with the programme allowed those who had contact with their children to continue to do so.

Many of those who did not have contact prior to being in the programme were able to increase contact with their children. Behnke & Allen (2007) reported that although non-custodial fathers do not usually live with their children on a daily basis, in many cases they have contact and a relationship with their children. Researchers have pointed to benefits to children having fathers actively involved in their lives. Harper & Fine (2006), who looked specifically at non-resident fathers, found that displays of warmth and support from non-resident fathers were associated with lower levels of anxiety, depression, delinquency and drug use among adolescents. Other researchers have reported benefits to children from fathers being active and present in their lives, such as higher academic achievement, fewer behavioural problems and emotional problems, higher self-esteem, higher life satisfaction, and better child peer relations and emotional regulation (Amato & Gilbreth 1999; Coley 2003; Roggman *et al.* 2004; Bronte-Tinkew *et al.* 2006; Lee *et al.* 2007).

Evaluation of the ATI programme revealed that the programme benefit families and society as a whole. One fatherhood programme Executive Director stated the importance of the programme to families and society this way, 'The men are working and supporting their children. They are paying taxes and supporting their children rather than the taxpayers supporting them.' (I. Luckey, conversation with William Jenkins, March 2009) The South Carolina State Director, Department of Social Services, Child Support Enforcement expressed his opinion about the ATI programme as:

'I am convinced that this strategy of enforcing child support against very low-income people is the most effective strategy thus far. In fact, I have become a disciple of the programme, and believe that it has provided much needed support for these low-income fathers that are ordered to pay support through child support enforcement.' (L. Potts, conversation with Larry McKeown, April 2007)

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

A limitation of this study is that there is no post-ATI data. Without such data we are unable to assess how well the men maintain behaviours and skills they practised while in the programme. We do not know how many men continued to maintain employment and make consistent child support payments, and how many maintained contact and relationships with their children. Lack of funding to follow up with the fathers after they complete the programme is the primary reason that follow-up information is not available.

The study would be strengthened if the children of the fathers could be interviewed to get their opinions about changes they experience or observe since their father has been in the programme. Having greater access to more mothers to get their input would also strengthen the study. Inclusion of the aforementioned would increase our knowledge of the impact of the non-fiscal benefits of the ATI programme.

SUMMARY

The ATI component of fatherhood programmes provides courts with an alternative solution to low-income fathers who are at risk of incarceration for non-payment of child support. Instead of sentencing the men to spend time in jail, the courts order the men to fatherhood programmes as ATI participants, where they will receive help in securing employment, paying consistent child support, and learning or retooling on parenting and other essential life skills. This not only gives the men an opportunity to better themselves, but also help their children. The men are earning a steady income, making regular child support payments and working to pay off any arrearage. In addition, the men are able to provide the essential role that fathers have in their children's lives.

The ATI component can easily be integrated into existing fatherhood programmes. It is crucial to form key relationships within the community and have dedicated staff that understand the issues this population face. The ATI programme provides courts an alternative to sending non-violent low-income men to jail, which can help them get the necessary assistance to turn their lives around and work through the many obstacles they face.

The ATI component of fatherhood programmes exceeded expectations during the reported 3 years of operation. The fatherhood programmes with the ATI component demonstrated considerable savings in costs to the state and helped families begin receiving consistent child support payments. It also helped non-custodial fathers on the path of strengthening their role as actively engaged fathers in the lives of their children.

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