REVOLUTIONARY DEPARTURES: REIMAGINING THE WORLD OF BLACK FATHERHOOD

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REVOLUTIONARY DEPARTURES: REIMAGINING THE WORLD OF BLACK FATHERHOOD

by

CLINTON BOYD, JR.

Under the Direction of Deirdre Oakley, PhD

ABSTRACT

The term “Deadbeat Dad” is often associated with Black fathers, suggesting they have relinquished their parental responsibilities. While research has emerged in recent years examining the social institution of Black fatherhood, many of these studies have yet to interpret their findings through an analytical lens that prioritizes race, gender, and social class status. To fill this gap, I utilize the theories of systemic racism and controlling images to explore how race, gender, and class-based oppression affects the fatherhood experiences of low-income, Black men. Further, I draw on these theories to explore how low-income, Black fathers challenge the credibility of the “Deadbeat Dad” narrative. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 23 low-income, Black fathers residing throughout metropolitan Atlanta to accomplish these aims. Findings
reveal that systemic racism and controlling images create significant barriers for the fathers, particularly in terms of providing financial support for their children. Findings also indicate that the fathers viewed “being there” for their children as the most essential aspect of parenthood and relied on an assortment of parenting practices to improve the quality of their relationship with their offspring. Also, findings highlight how fathers relied on their religious and spiritual values to contend with the vexing institutional roadblocks they continually face. I conclude my dissertation by making several policy recommendations intended to enhance paternal engagement, strengthen the social institution of Black fatherhood, and combat the stereotypical image of the “Deadbeat” Black father.

INDEX WORDS: Fatherhood, Black Fatherhood, Racial Discrimination, Inequality, and Poverty
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by

CLINTON BOYD, JR.

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences Georgia State University 2019
REVOLUTIONARY DEPARTURES: REIMAGINING THE WORLD OF BLACK
FATHERHOOD

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Office of Graduate Studies
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Georgia State University
December 2019
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Clinton and Brenda Boyd, and my daughter, A’mari Boyd. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to the Clifton, Brown, Jackson, Attaway, and McCule families. Last – but not least – this dissertation is also dedicated to my spiritual family, Lindsay Street Baptist Church. Without the steadfast love, support, and encouragement, over the past six years, from all those whom I have named, I would have failed to cross the proverbial Ph.D. finish line.
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Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the Black men featured in this dissertation for courageously sharing their life stories with me. Without them, this dissertation would not be possible.
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The controversial Moynihan report, released in 1965, argued that the African-American family was on the verge of collapse due to escalating rates of non-marital childbearing and the rise of female-headed households (U.S. Department of Labor 1965). These trends became more entrenched in subsequent decades within the African-American community (Acs et al. 2013; McLanahan and Jencks 2015), leading to widespread outcry over who is to blame for what Moynihan described as the “complete breakdown” of the African-American family. A rallying point was needed and - for bastions of the traditional nuclear family structure - one was found in unmarried African American fathers, particularly those with low-incomes. Across the political spectrum, it became commonplace for elected officials to chastise these fathers for allegedly shunning their parental responsibilities (Bennett 2001:71–100; Dyson 2016b:169–73; Edin and Nelson 2013:1–6; Harvey-Wingfield and Feagin 2013:73–75). Consequently, the portrayal of low-income, African-American fathers as “deadbeat dads” became ubiquitous (Pate, Jr. 2005).

However, to the dismay and disbelief of adherents to the “deadbeat dads” perspective, countless studies suggest that low-income, African-American fathers are actually highly involved parents (Edin and Nelson 2013; Edin, Tach, and Mincy 2009; Jones and Mosher 2013; Tach, Mincy, and Edin 2010), although their involvement is sporadic given their complex needs (Dion et al. 2018). Several studies indicate that a bevy of factors ranging from economic insatiability to conflictual co-parenting relationships shape the parenting landscape of low-income, African-American fathers (Edin and Nelson 2013; Friend et al. 2016; Mincy, Jethwani, and Klempin 2015). While these studies have contributed much to the Western scholarship about the experiences of African American fathers, I contend there is still much to learn.
Many fatherhood studies have yet to interpret their empirical findings through an analytical lens that prioritizes race, gender, and social class status. For example, Edin and Nelson’s (2013) study of low-income, black fathers and white fathers offered fresh insights about their experiences as parents. Given their racially bifurcated sample, one would have expected them to explicitly focus on how the intersections of race, gender, and class-based oppression – both historical and contemporary – contributed to the distinct fatherhood experiences of the Black and White men included in their study. However, Edin and Nelson were unable to make any race or gender specific claims in their study because they disregarded both race and gender a central feature of their analytical framework. In fact, Edin and Nelson patently assert that race deserves only peripheral treatment in their study because the social class status of their research subjects warrants more analytical attention. As they write (2013:16–17):

This is not a book about race; though we note racial differences when they occur, they are more in degree than in kind. In this narrative, where black and white men live in more similar contexts than in most places, racial differences are far outweighed by shared social class.

Their assertion that “racial differences are far outweighed by shared social class” is baffling considering they perceptively begin their book with an articulation of how stereotypical images of the absentee Black father inundated mass media platforms.

Similarly, Hamer’s (2001) study of live-away black fathers provided rich information about the paternal behaviors and strategies low-income, black men used to connect with their nonresident children. Hamer’s study is grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1977), which examines how individuals interact with the social-ecological environment and vice versa. Absent from Bronfenbrenner’s theory, however, is any emphasis on the degree to which the social systems that individuals cycle through are racially structured to maintain a caste-like system wherein whites are superordinate and blacks are subordinate (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 2006). Therefore, Hamer’s interpretation of her findings, which do somewhat address issues of race and gender,
could have been significantly enhanced had her study been grounded in a theoretical framework that addresses the systemic nature of race, gender, and class-based oppression.

Furthermore, more generally, relatively few studies on black fatherhood have examined the ways in which black fathers understand their roles and responsibilities as parents, especially those that may challenge traditional, heterosexual norms of fatherhood (Johnson and Young, Jr. 2016). Moreover, little is known about the caregiving and nurturing practices African American fathers (Johnson and Young, Jr. 2016), thus making “feminist fathering” another area for fatherhood scholars to empirically explore in their research. Given that most fatherhood research on black men have prioritized the perspectives of nonresident fathers, future scholarship must place more emphasis on the experiences of residential fathers, single-fathers, and/or social fathers (Johnson and Young, Jr. 2016).

Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is two-fold: (1) apply the theories of systemic racism and controlling images to a study of low-income, African-American fathers, and (2) explore whether the parenting beliefs and behaviors of low-income, African-American fathers defy popular misconceptions about their parental desires and capabilities. I accomplished these aims by exploring low-income, African American fathers’ subordinate position in society within a geographic location that has not been the subject of much research on the topic: Metropolitan Atlanta. This dissertation study is embedded within the extant family policy research on African American fatherhood. For operationalization purposes, the four dominant themes routinely explored in the fatherhood research literature have been subsumed into the broader categorization of interrelated factors,¹ which is a term used by family policy researchers who primarily study low-income, African-American fathers (2006, 2014).

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¹ Intrapersonal factors (human capital); Interpersonal factors (relationships with children’s mothers); Neighborhood and Community Factors (neighborhood violence exposure, community-level unemployment, and community-level incarceration); and Policy Factors (child support enforcement policy).
To assess the degree to which low-income, African American fathers are affected by intersecting realities of race, class, and gender-based oppression, I drew on two sociological theories. First, I relied on Feagin’s theory of systemic racism (2006, 2014) as an analytic framework to assess how low-income, African American fathers are ensnared in a generational web of racialized oppression undergirded by white-on-black domination. Second, I used the controlling images theory (2004) for comparative analytical purposes. Specifically, the controlling images theory allowed me to identify when the parental values and behaviors of low-income, African American fathers contrasted with stereotypical depictions of African American fatherhood. Additionally, this dissertation study relied on a qualitative approach known as the narrative research method. This particular qualitative approach allowed me to collect data about the life histories of African American men, thereby permitting me to explore how their unfolding life events shape their experiences as fathers.

1.2 Establishing the Phenomenon: Problem Statement

The Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) should have been a game-changer at its deliverance. However, the full impact of this judicial decree sluggishly came to fruition, even after the Supreme Court’s second ruling calling for school desegregation with all deliberate speed (Bond 2015; Ogletree, Jr. 2005). Despite the well-meaning intent associated with this precept, the scourge of racial inequality incessantly flowed through the impalpable veins of the United States. To continue the fight for freedom of opportunity, between 1954-1968, the Civil Rights Movement gained steadfast momentum (Morris 1986). Utilizing the civil disobedience doctrine (King, Jr. 1964), Civil Rights leaders placed their struggle for racial equality before the world. Their noble

---

2 I borrow this title from Robert Merton’s article entitled Three fragments from a sociologist’s notebooks: Establishing the phenomenon, specified ignorance, and strategic research materials (1987).
quest "to save the soul of America" was often met with violent opposition (King, Jr. 2003:233) at
the individual and institutional level (Ture and Hamilton 1967).

This led to the Civil Right Act of 1964, signed by President Lyndon Bans. Johnson. Also in
1964, President Johnson waged an "unconditional war on poverty" (President Lyndon B. Johnson
1964:III). Over the course of four years (e.g., 1964-1968), policies enacted by the Johnson
Administration altered the admission standards for American schools and universities, led to health
insurance for the elderly (Medicare) and the poor (Medicaid), established employment and training
programs, prohibited discriminatory voting practices in southern states, and reconfigured the
American social safety net (Bailey and Danziger 2013; Edin and Shaefer 2015:11–17). While these
policies were intended to improve the quality of life for poor people and African-Americans alike,
these legislative enactments did little to ameliorate the racial divide between African-Americans
and whites in the United States (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1968).

More importantly, the War on Poverty was far from “unconditional.” In fact, one could
argue that it further fractured America’s racial landscape by destabilizing the African American
family. For example, the Aid to Dependent Children program (ADC) - authorized under Title IV of
the Social Security Act of 1935 - was expanded to include more than widowed mothers (Edin and
Shaefer 2015:11–17). The ADC program was eventually amended and became Aid to Families
with Dependent Children (AFDC). AFDC allowed divorced and never-married single mothers, the
latter of which was disproportionately African-American women, to join welfare rolls (Harris
2008). However, racially discriminatory efforts were made to prevent African American women
from joining the dole. Once the institutional burden of racial discrimination eased, African
American women eventually became eligible for social welfare benefits. However, their
participation came at a hefty familial cost. In order for these mothers to qualify for public
assistance, the fathers of their children could not reside in the household (Harris 2008). The
premise undergirding this federal mandate was that if African American fathers were in the home, then they should contribute to the household coffers; although, little attention was given to the socioeconomic realities of these men.

When we consider the social, economic, and structural backdrop’s impact on African-American men of this particular period and even today, this exclusion has real significance for African-American men: White flight from urban centers facilitated by de facto (e.g., redlining) and de jure (e.g., racist implementation of the GI Bill of Rights [e.g., African-American veterans were denied access to some colleges and housing communities]) discrimination (Coates 2014; Katznelson 2005; Rothstein 2017); the proliferation of wage stagnation, deindustrialization, and industry mechanization (Wilson 1987, 1996, 2009); the advent of “mass incarceration” (Alexander 2012; Coates 2015b). Said differently, these social, economic, and structural transformations uniquely affected African-American men (Council of Economic Advisers 2016), many of whom were fathers. Because American social welfare policy has traditionally viewed men as the “underserving poor” (Hofstadter 1992; Katz 2013), the various forms of government assistance offered to African-American mothers were unavailable to African-American fathers during this period. Instead of offering African-American fathers public assistance, the clichéd notion of "fatherless households" rose meteorically alongside the War on Poverty – again, even though “man in the house” policies banned fathers from households (Edin and Shaefer 2015:14).

A bombshell report commissioned by President Johnson contributed to this omission. The product was The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (U.S. Department of Labor 1965), commonly known as the Moynihan Report, which was written by former Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The Moynihan Report asserted the Negro family was on the verge of a complete breakdown because of the pathologies of single female-headed households. The
collapse of the African American family was also attributable to 25 percent of African American children living in father-absent homes.

Moynihan’s report created a firestorm of controversy as detractors interpreted his argument as racist and pejorative. "In popular press, it was regarded as something that was anti-black," stated Moynihan (2000). Critics were so preoccupied with the surface layer of his argument (e.g., rise in out-of-wedlock births and increase in female-headed households) that they became oblivious to his core assertions. According to Moynihan (U.S. Department of Labor 1965:15–19), the relics of slavery and growing unemployment among African-American men caused the supposed erosion of the African-American family. Isabel Sawhill (2014:68) perfectly describes the facile critique of Moynihan’s dissenters when she wrote, “Critics charged Moynihan with racism and blaming the victim, despite the fact that he had identified joblessness among young black males as the primary source of family instability.”

As one would assume, many of the African American men Moynihan described were fathers. Therefore, to unearth the complexities and nuances associated with Moynihan’s thesis, one must sift through the fatherhood archives. Put differently, “a firm understanding of fatherhood in the present requires a deep appreciation of fatherhood in the past” (LaRossa 2007:87).

1.3 Privileged Accounts: An Incomplete History of American Fatherhood

Contemporary conceptualizations and internalizations of fatherhood should not be separated from “an understanding of the historical process in which it was produced” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:54–55). It is beyond imperative for a “historical perspective” to foreground fatherhood research (LaRossa 2012a:38). This is especially true for African American fatherhood research. Doing so permits social scientists to appropriately gauge whether or not their empirical findings are indeed novel, or simply rediscoveries of veiled phenomena that failed to be infused into
mainstream academic discourse. Highlighting the historical context of African American fatherhood may also call into question mainstream theoretical fatherhood perspectives.

For example, historical fatherhood studies suggest that throughout the colonial phase of American history, successful fathering was dependent upon fathers’ ability to indoctrinate their children with Christian based moral values (Lamb 2000). By the 1800s, fathers’ societal roles shifted as the Industrial Revolution forced them to exit their households in search of work. In short, fatherhood became synonymous with breadwinning (Lamb 2000; Rotundo 1985). Although the “moral overseer” and “breadwinner” roles have historically represented dominant images of American fatherhood, other fatherhood ideals (e.g., “sex role model” and “nurturer”) emerged to rival these established fatherhood models (Lamb 2000). These theoretical fatherhood axioms indeed paint a vivid picture of the institution’s origin story. However, these historical portraits are far from pristine.

It is important to acknowledge that an overwhelming majority of mainstream historical fatherhood research accents the experiences of men of European descent. Therefore, one could surmise that the authors of these studies subscribed to the ideology of “whiteness” (Baldwin 1963; Cherlin 2014:49–55; Du Bois 1935:700; Roediger 2007). Far too many historical fatherhood studies have downplayed the magnitude in which past traumas have deleteriously affected the fatherhood experiences of minority men. For example, the genocide of the indigenous persons of the Americas (Madley 2016), through European encroachment and military conquest (Clarke 2011; Feagin 2006), altered the fatherhood experiences of native Americans (Limb and Wendt 2017). Further, the human plunder of people of African descent (Clarke 2011; Du Bois 1896; General Assembly 2016; Wright 1941), which culminated in the American institution of slavery (Feagin 2006; Martinez 2017; Wilder 2013), ill-affected fathers from this enslaved demographic group (Du Bois 1908; Franklin and James 2015; Hamer 2001; Johnson, Jr. 2014). It is within this context that
the history of African-American fathers warrants special analysis during the periods of slavery, The Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow (see, Du Bois 1908; Hamer 2001; Johnson, Jr. 2014; LaRossa 2011).

In relation to the African-American family, prominent sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (1939) popularized the notion that “chaos and disorganization” characterized most African-American families post-slavery. Arguments presented by Frazier (1939), which was reinforced by Moynihan (U.S. Department of Labor 1965), were steadily greeted with rebuke and scorn for their pathological portrayal of the African-American family (Billingsley 1968). Nevertheless, while convincing, the arguments offered by detractors failed to explicitly accentuate the perspectives of African-American fathers, many of whom experienced parenthood at a time when American families were becoming less traditional and more complex (see, Carlson and Berger 2013).

1.4 Altered Landscapes: Shifting Family Arrangements and African American Fatherhood

Since the mid-twentieth century, family patterns have considerably changed in America (Marcia J. Carlson and England 2011). In the 1960s, nearly all children were raised by both (married) biological parents, although racial disparities existed (U.S. Department of Labor 1965). However, in recent decades, female-headed household rates have increased; the divorce rate has risen; and out-of-wedlock childbearing has become more widespread across race and socioeconomic statuses (McLanahan and Jencks 2015; Pew Research Center 2015). The rapid change in family living arrangements disproportionately affects less advantaged groups (Berger 2017; Cherlin 2010, 2014; Sawhill 2014), African-Americans in particular given their inordinate poverty status (Acs et al. 2013; Burton et al. 2017).

The fraction of African-American children born outside of marriage has tripled over the past four decades, up from 22 percent in 1960 to 73 percent in 2010 (Acs et al. 2013). In 2015, roughly 70 percent of African-American children were born into in single-parent households,
compared to 40 percent of Latino children, 26 percent of white children, and 17 percent of Asian children (Child Trends 2015). The relative decline in two-parent families within the African American family structure is not merely a consequence of “greater female autonomy and income combined with an increased social acceptance of single mothers” (Sigle-Rushton et al. 2002:410). Likewise, it is linked to the societal narrative that suggests African-American fathers have purposely abandoned their roles and responsibilities as parents (Moyers 1986).

As a consequence, over the past several decades, African-American fathers have garnered considerable attention from the American public and social scientific community (Aronson, Whitehead, and Baber 2003; Bowman 1990; Bowman and Forman 1997; Hammond et al. 2011; McAdoo 1988, 1993; Thomas, Krampe, and Newton 2008). Although research has acknowledged how social, economic, and structural factors negatively affect paternal involvement among African-American fathers (Hammond et al. 2011; Holcomb, Edin, Max, Young Jr, et al. 2015; Johnson, Jr. 2003; Roy 2004a; Smeeding, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2011; Young, Jr. 2004b; Young, Jr. and Holcomb 2007), it remains without question that they are regularly involved in the lives of their children (Carlson and McLanahan 2010; Coles and Green 2009; Edin et al. 2009; Hamer 1998). In fact, despite the stereotypical messaging suggesting otherwise, research suggests that African American fathers are more involved in the lives of their children than Latino and white fathers (Cabrera et al. 2008; Danziger and Radin 1990; Edin et al. 2009; Huang 2006a; Jones and Mosher 2013; King 1994; King, Harris, and Heard 2004; Mincy and Pouncy 2007; Mott 1990; Seltzer and Bianchi 1988). Specifically, black fathers were involved with their children in the areas of childcare activities such as eating with or feeding their children, bathing their children, playing with their children, reading to their children, and talking with their children about certain activities (Jones and Mosher 2013). Given the distinct roles African-American fathers play in promoting the well-being of their children (Adkison-Johnson et al. 2016; Caldwell et al. 2014; Ellis et al. 2014;
Johnson, Rich, and Keene 2016; Rowe, Leech, and Cabrera 2017), their wholesome involvement in their children’s life’s should be encouraged.

Empirical studies have established a positive relationship between father involvement and child well-being (Caldwell et al. 2014; Coleman, Garfield, and Health 2004; Coley 2001; Ellis et al. 2014; Lamb 2010; Yogman and Garfield 2016). In the context of early childhood, preschool-aged children with involved African-American fathers fare better cognitively, socio-emotionally, and linguistically (Levy-Shiff et al. 1990; Rowe et al. 2017; Yogman, Kindlon, and Earls 1995). Moving into pre-adolescence, father involvement during this crucial period of child development is associated with improved academic success and decreased behavioral challenges (Amato and Gilbreth 1999). Once children have reached the point of adolescence, paternal involvement at this particular juncture leads to higher rates of scholastic achievement and fewer externalizing behaviors (Carlson 2006; Harris, Furstenberg, and Marmer 1998). However, conversely, African-American children lacking the involvement of their father experience considerably worse outcomes academically, behaviorally, and developmentally, regardless of their father’s educational or social class status (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

Although the rate of fatherless households has increased among all racial and ethnic groups in recent decades (Acs et al. 2013), its prevalence remains disproportionately high in the African-American community (Amato and Dorius 2010). As a result, scholars typically examine how father absence in the African-American community affects poor, single mothers and, to a greater extent, their disadvantaged children (Andersen and Wildeman 2014; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin, Lein, and Jencks 1997; Jackson 1999; Sykes and Pettit 2015; Wakefield and Wildeman 2016; Wilson 1996). While these studies have provided the American public with an abundance of information, a dearth of empirical research exists on the fathers of these children in proportion to the available scholarship on mothers (National Academies Press 2016:12–14).
1.5 Specifying Ignorance: Contributions to the Social Science Literature

This dissertation study contributes to the social science research literature in several ways. First, within the discipline of sociology, the theories of systemic racism and controlling images have yet to be applied to African American fatherhood research. Given the irrefutable legacy of race, gender, and class-based oppression in the United States of America, it is important to empirically examine the social institution of African-American fatherhood using these theoretical frameworks, as both theories provide opportunities to learn how low-income, African-American fathers circumvent the obstacles associated with the interconnected modes of race, class, and gendered-based oppression.

Second, as noted in two national parenting reports, fathers, especially racial/ethnic minority fathers, remain underrepresented in parenting research (National Academies Press 2016; ZERO TO THREE 2016). Therefore, this dissertation study allowed me to fill this research void as I explored how interrelated factors influence parenting practices among African American men. Additionally, some social scientists have called for a reinvigoration in the studies of Black fatherhood, especially in the area of alternative fathering practices that prioritize nurturing and caregiving (Johnson and Young, Jr. 2016). Since a major component of this dissertation study is to explore the parenting beliefs and behaviors of low-income, African American fathers, findings yielded from this study will ideally help to fill an important gap in the research literature.

Third, this dissertation study has implications for the evidence-based policy and practice fields. African American fathers are often confronted with economic and social barriers that prevent them from adequately supporting themselves, their families, and of particular concern, their children’s life course development. Therefore, an essential aim of this study is to ensure policymakers have the necessary research at their disposal to enact legislation that supports, rather

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3 I also borrow this title from Robert Merton’s article entitled *Three fragments from a sociologist’s notebooks: Establishing the phenomenon, specified ignorance, and strategic research materials* (1987).
than destabilizes, the fragile relationships that often exists between low-income, African American children and their fathers. This study not only involves understanding the effects of mistargeted social policies on marginalized African American fathers and their disadvantaged neighborhoods, but also how such policies fail to consider how interrelated factors may adversely affect family structure, child functioning, and child well-being.

Fourth, a significant amount of conceptual development and exploratory work remains in fatherhood research. Therefore, surveys should not be the only tool in our arsenal. The challenge, then, in designing new surveys is not to just look at past surveys for what questions to include, but to draw on the insights and findings of new research that uses qualitative approaches. Conclusions drawn from qualitative fatherhood research will inform the content domains (e.g., child maltreatment risk) and question sequencing in future fatherhood surveys.

Fifth, with the exception of earlier works by DuBois and Davis (1941; 1901, 1907), the Southeast region has been overlooked in urban poverty research. The Chicago School of Sociology has dominated this arena (Morris 2015; Wright II 2016). As new research has emerged, it is reported that roughly 32 percent of children living in the Southeast region are growing up in extreme poverty (Shaefer, Edin, and Talbert 2015) and are experiencing difficulties transcending their impoverished time rising out of poverty (Chetty et al. 2014). Considering African-American children are disproportionately poor (Burton et al. 2017), additional research is needed to explore how those contextual factors associated with poverty potentially affect the parenting experiences of African-American fathers in the Southeast region. Metropolitan Atlanta is ideal for such a study given its underexamined array of social, economic, and political challenges (Brown-Nagin 2011; Chetty et al. 2014; Hobson 2017; Holmes and Kneebone 2016; Kneebone and Berube 2013; Partnership for Southern Equity 2016; Williams and Torian 2015). Moreover, given the "geographical concentration" of fatherhood studies in "Midwestern and Eastern urban centers"
(Johnson, Jr. 2001:168), this study will fill a regional gap in the urban and family policy research literature.

1.6 Dissertation Outline

Following the Chapter 1 introduction, Chapter 2 opens with the literature review. In this chapter, I synthesize the research literature from multiple disciplines to demonstrate how interrelated factors (e.g., intrapersonal factors, interpersonal factors, neighborhood and community factors, and policy factors) influence father involvement among African American men. After Chapter 2 ends, Chapter 3 opens by highlighting the theoretical frameworks undergirding this dissertation study. More specifically, the theoretical frameworks being applied to this dissertation study are the theories of systemic racism and controlling images.

Chapter 4 offers an in-depth discussion about the methodological approach applied to this dissertation study. The methods chapter begins with the overall study design, which is a qualitative approach known as narrative analysis. The methods chapter then goes on to describe the sample and sample selection criterion of this dissertation study. From there, the data management protocol is discussed. Additionally, the data collection tools and data analysis techniques are described.

Chapters 5 and 6 are specific to my study findings. In chapter 5, I discuss certain aspects of my dissertation findings in relation to the key dimensions of systemic racism brought to bear for this study, which include unjust impoverishment and the costs and burdens of racism. Chapter 6 discusses how the parenting values and behaviors of interviewed African American fathers challenge gendered depictions (e.g., controlling images) that imply these fathers are inherently violent criminals and uninvolved parents. Additionally, chapter 6 offers a brief description of how interviewed fathers used spirituality as an active coping strategy to deal with their life challenges. Chapter 7 will bring my dissertation to a close by discussing the implications of my study.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior studies have stated, “a multidisciplinary and contextualized perspective” will surely “help move forward the study of low-income, minority, and unmarried fathers and their children” (Coley 2001:743). This is especially true for low-income, African-American men as their fatherhood experiences are affected by a wide range of interrelated factors (Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015). Whether due to racial, economic, social, structural, or political factors, historically, African-American men have been disempowered and socially relegated to the margins of society (2025 Campaign for Black Men and Boys 2010; Anderson 2008; Burton and Snyder 1998; Council of Economic Advisers 2016; Elejalde-Ruiz 2016; Ellison 1952; My Brother’s Keeper Task Force 2014). Du Bois (1903:3) avowed, “Throughout history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness.” The failure to treat African-American men as integral members of society undermines their life course development (Johsnon, Jr. 2010), which has repercussions for their experiences as parents should they become fathers (Dion et al. 2018; Doyle, Joe, and Caldwell 2012).

2.1 Intrapersonal Factors: The Human Capital of Low-Income African American Fathers

Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated how the human capital (e.g., educational attainment and employment status; and parental knowledge, skills, and behaviors) of parents either support or hinder the life course development of their children (Lareau 2002, 2011; Weininger, Lareau, and Conley 2015). Families support the healthy development of their children in three principal ways: biological and genetic endowments, financial investments (goods and services purchased), and behavioral investments (caregiving quantity and quality) (Berger and Font 2015). The two mechanisms of financial investments and behavioral investments can be subsumed into Marsiglio and Roy’s (2012) fatherhood definition of human capital. In their view, human capital
refers to “the aspects of jobs, education, and interpersonal skills that enhance fathers’ efforts to manage transitions associated with their self-as-father, father-child, coparental, and copartner trajectories.” (Marsiglio and Roy 2012:72). In the case of African American fathers, they can be located at any point on the human capital continuum, thereby affecting their ability to make certain investments in their children.

2.1.1 Intrapersonal Factors: Educational Attainment and Employment Status

On the extreme end of the spectrum, news outlets, political pundits, academic and non-academic writers detail the societal shortcomings of low-income, African-American men (Baldwin 1963; Collins and Wanamaker 2017; Johnson, Jr. 2010; Wolfers, Leonhardt, and Quealy 2015). Frequently covered in their reports are stories related to their educational failures (2025 Campaign for Black Men and Boys 2010; My Brother’s Keeper Task Force 2014); their involvement in an overzealous criminal justice system (Alexander 2012; Western 2007); their sweltering disenchantment with a discriminatory U.S. labor market (Pager 2009; Smith 2017); or their gross dissatisfaction with other mainstream social institutions (Venkatesh 2015; Young, Jr. 2004b). American society typically views these men as irredeemable and indecent (Young, Jr. 2018). Because of such widespread public disdain, many low-income, African-American men know nothing about an “American Dream” as far too many perish before awakening from their “American Nightmare” (Dyson 2016a, 2017; Fulton and Martin 2017; Powell et al. 2016). Consequently, for those of them who are fathers (Young, Jr. 2017), their children immensely suffer (Wakefield and Wildeman 2016).

The educational attainment of low-income, African-American fathers significantly influences their transition into fatherhood (Nelson 2004). For instance, in the case of all young disadvantaged men, 9 percent of them between the ages of 18-24 are fathers. However, for African-American men in this age range, their figure far exceeds that of the general population (Smeeding
et al. 2011). Research on low-income, African-American men suggest they father children before completing their formal education (Mincy, Lewis, Jr., and Han 2006). In fact, Nightingale and Sorensen (2006) concluded by ages 24 and 34, respectively, 25 and 50 percent of low-income, less-educated African-American men are fathers.

The educational attainment of low-income, African American men has major repercussions for their labor market status. In the eyes of employers, a high school diploma reflects one’s ability to be minimally productive on the job (Ritter and Taylor 2011). In the case of undereducated young African-American men, their lack of high school education or GED, coupled with other barriers, has prevented many of them from joining the American workforce as their unemployment rate is 46 percent (Kuehn 2013).

In 2008, roughly 20 percent of low-educated men held regular full-time jobs (Smeeding et al. 2011), and droves of young, undereducated men encountered joblessness and underemployment due to The Great Recession (Hout 2017). As Smeeding, Garfinkel, and Mincy (2011) illustrate, young, undereducated minority men were especially hard-hit by the recession. In particular, between 2009 and 2010, more than 30 percent of African-American men between the ages of 16 to 24 were unemployed (Peck 2010). This rate could have indeed been higher on the account that some men may have permanently exited the labor market (Sum et al. 2011).

Even in the midst of the economic recovery, African-Americans experienced the slowest gains (Hout 2017), particularly low-income African-American men (Kuehn 2013). However, for low-income African-American men, joblessness and its associated hardships follow them no matter the economic landscape (Simms et al. 2013; Sum et al. 2011). As McDaniel and Kuehn (2013) elucidate, even several years before The Great Recession, African-American men, in their early-twenties, had the lowest employment rates of any racial or ethnic group. As a result, for those
economically vulnerable men who were fathers, many of them often find it difficult to financially support themselves, let alone their children (Mincy et al. 2015).

Financially unstable African-American fathers encounter a multitude of employment barriers due to their meager educational status, a contracted pool of manufacturing jobs, the emergence of the service economy, and their involvement in the criminal justice system (Johnson, Jr. 2003). For example, after examining the consequences of deindustrialization on inner-city, African-American fathers, Bowman and Sanders (1998) concluded that African-American fathers experienced unemployment because of deindustrialization, racism, and structural inequality. This leads to severe provider role strain among fathers, wherein many of them resort to a life of social isolation, criminal involvement, and substance addiction (D’Angelo et al. 2016). Empirical studies have greatly emphasized how undereducated nonresident fathers respond when they are unable to align themselves with the breadwinner role (Anderson 1990, 2008; Hamer 2001; Johnson, Jr. 2003; Young, Jr. and Holcomb 2007).

For these fathers, many of them retreat from the lives of their children due to their inability to financially provide for them. The child’s mother and her family may hasten this process for similar reasons (Friend et al. 2016; Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. A. Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015). Scholars argue that provider role strain negatively affects fathers, their family involvement and their capacity to fulfill non-financial fatherhood roles (Anderson 2009; Bowman and Sanders 1998; McAdoo 1993; Roy 2004). As a result, many African-American fathers grow skeptical about their presence in their children’s lives (Wilson 2008).

2.1.2 Intrapersonal Factors: Parenting Skills, Knowledge, and Beliefs

African American father’s values and beliefs about their parental responsibilities determine not only their level of involvement, but also the quality of their involvement with their children. The culture of fatherhood - which comprises the norms, values, beliefs and expressive symbols
pertaining to fatherhood (LaRossa, 1988, 1997, 2011) - is connected to parenting knowledge. Utilizing language from the federally commissioned report, *Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0-8* (National Academies Press 2016), “parenting knowledge” refers to childrearing facts, information, and skills attained through experience or education. Compared to the larger fatherhood population, relatively little is known concerning how urban, African-American fathers learn how to be parents (Julion et al. 2007). A handful of studies, however, have investigated this conundrum.

For example, Smith and colleagues (2015) concluded, African-American fathers usually rely on their family members when learning the dos and don’ts of parenting. Moreover, the same study found that African-American fathers disfavored the acquisition of parenting information from technology-based sources as they placed more stock in direct interactions with staff (Smith et al. 2015). In contrast, however, another fatherhood-focused study discovered that African-American fathers were indifferent about whether they gained parenting information from technology-based sources (Rostad et al. 2017). A national parenting study also revealed that African-American fathers, across the income distribution, felt their parenting knowledge was subpar (ZERO TO THREE 2016). As a result, many of them were distrusting of their parental instincts.

For African-American fathers skeptical of their parenting capabilities, as indicated in earlier research on the subject, “a lack of knowledge about child development may cause fathers to doubt their ability to provide paternal caregiving for their young children” (Johnson, Jr. 2002:77). Understanding that some African-American men will benefit from various forms of parental support, many responsible fatherhood programs have sprung to life over the past few decades to fill this void (Klempin and Mincy 2011; Mincy and Pouncy 2002). The potential impact of these programs applies to all fathers, irrespective of their social class status and age (Marsiglio and Roy 2012). Although these fatherhood initiatives have been quite influential, many fathers fail to join
these programs, perhaps because cultural and social conditions shape how they perceive themselves as fathers (Marsiglio and Roy 2012).

Similar to the culture of fatherhood concept (LaRossa 1988), “parenting attitudes” denote the beliefs, viewpoints, rejoinders, or established ways of thinking about elements of parenting or child development, including parents’ roles and responsibilities (National Academies Press 2016). For African-American fathers wedded to the notion that they are financially responsible for their children, their self-esteem may be inseparably linked to the “breadwinner” role due to societal expectations (Eagly 1987). As a result, they may downplay their significance as a socializing agent in their children’s lives as such acts are considered mother’s work. Cabrera and colleagues (2000) note, “The constant presence of mothers as children’s primary caregivers fostered the implicit assumption that father-child relationships had little impact on children’s development.” Nevertheless, many African-American fathers, their children’s mothers, and broader society, mistakenly assume that the breadwinner role is the sole benchmark for paternal involvement (Johnson, Jr. 2003). However, some African-American fathers may be moved to validate their worth as parents in other meaningful ways.

For example, to radically redefine their fatherhood identity, many low-income African-American fathers have adopted the “new-father ideal” wherein they place considerable stock in spending quality time with their children (Edin and Nelson 2013). In doing so, this sub-group of fathers place a higher premium on emotional involvement and direct engagement to compensate for their waning labor market status in recent decades. Findings from other qualitative studies echo these sentiments (Hamer 2001; Hammond et al. 2011; Marsiglio and Roy 2012; Roy 2004b; Waller 2002). While low-income African-American fathers contentedly embrace this nurturant-centered fatherhood model, others still take pride in being their family’s chief breadwinner (Jethwani, Mincy, and Klempin 2014). Nonetheless, many low-income, African-American fathers view
providing non-economic support to their children as an equally critical dimension of parenting (Adkison-Johnson et al. 2016; Bradley 2000; Jethwani et al. 2014; McAdoo 1993; Mincy et al. 2015).

As stated in the Parenting Matters report (National Academies Press 2016), parenting behaviors or childrearing techniques constitute the foundation of parenting “practices.” The way in which “parenting practices” are described in the Parenting Matters report is quite reminiscent of LaRossa’s conduct of fatherhood concept (LaRossa 1988). Michael Lamb’s (1987) “paternal involvement” definition also bears significance here. Dissatisfied with the imprecise characterizations surrounding the term “paternal involvement,” Lamb and colleagues created a tripartite that was theoretically sound and conceptually exhaustive. Lamb’s (1987) paternal involvement typology consisted of three distinct components: (1) engagement, or the time fathers spend individually with their children; (2) accessibility, or the degree to which fathers are physically or emotionally available to their children; and (3) responsibility, or the extent to which fathers assume responsibility for their children’s welfare.

Concerning African-American fathers, regardless of their income level or residential status, the well-being of their children can be positively influenced by their paternal engagement (Jones and Mosher 2013). However, certain paternal engagement practices such as physical punishment can lead to adverse outcomes for children. Lee and colleagues (2008) concluded that African-American fathers, regardless of their socioeconomic status, were more likely than White and Hispanic fathers to spank their children.

Widely perceived as a method to redirect child misbehavior, albeit a controversial technique (Gershoff 2013; Patton 2017), spanking is a common practice among parents (Regalado et al. 2004). Although research suggests it is detrimental to child development (Maguire-Jack, Gromoske, and Berger 2012), spanking remains a widely-accepted form of managing problematic
child behavior. The ubiquitous application of corporal punishment by parents may explain why roughly 45% of male caregivers are involved in substantiated cases of child maltreatment (National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System 2017). However, regarding African-American fathers, these statistics should be treated with extreme skepticism.

While corporal punishment statistics are supposedly derived from “nationally representative” samples, it is important to acknowledge that nonresident fathers are “vastly underrepresented in major national surveys because they are difficult to locate” (Johnson, Levine, and Doolittle 1999:93), many of whom are low-income, African-American fathers. This is because national surveys are replete with coverage problems as they exclude the participation of individuals from institutionalized settings such as jails, prisons, and military barracks (Cherlin and Griffith 1998; Eggebeen 2002; Hernandez and Brandon 2002; Nelson 2004; Pettit 2012). The racial implications of this methodological shortcoming cannot be understated considering African-American men are disproportionately represented in the military and correctional facilities (Alexander 2012; Maxfield 2017). Moreover, because national surveys draw their samples from household units, African-American fathers are rarely surveyed due to their tenuous attachment to residential dwellings (Edin et al. 2009; Harris 2008; Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. A. Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015; Johnson III and Johnson, Jr. 2010; Rostad et al. 2017). Therefore, when conjecturing about the disciplinary techniques of African-American fathers, too much weight should not be placed on “nationally representative” research findings. Until data-gathering efforts are significantly improved to appropriately account for African-American fathers (Cherlin and Griffith 1998; Nelson 2004), it is more plausible to rely on studies comprised of non-probability samples to discern how African-American fathers discipline their children.

According to studies derived from non-probability samples, African-American fathers favor less intensive disciplinary methods when addressing their children’s problem behaviors, regardless

2.2 Interpersonal Factors: African-American Co-Parenting Behaviors

Traditionally, fatherhood has been considered a “package deal.” In other words, father involvement is dependent upon the father’s relationship with his child’s mother (Furstenberg, Jr. and Cherlin 1991; Townsend 2004). Depending on the quality of the relationship, cooperation or conflict may characterize the co-parenting relationship, simultaneously affecting whether or not fathers are involved in their children’s life (Friend et al. 2016). For those co-parenting relationships ripe with conflict, the collateral damage resulting from parental disharmony ultimately undermines the well-being of children (Adamsons and Johnson 2013; Marsiglio et al. 2000; Stewart 2003).

Whereas previous scholarship on the subject mainly examined the co-parenting relationships between divorced parents (Arendell 1986, 1995; Cherlin 1978; Furstenberg, Jr. and Cherlin 1991), contemporary research is now exploring the co-parenting experiences of unmarried parents, many of whom are African-American (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Edin et al. 1997; Edin and Nelson 2013;
The effects of father involvement are more consequential for African-American fathers (Edin and Nelson 2013), especially those who are low-income, noncustodial, and living in households dissimilar from their children (Carlson, McLanahan, and Brooks-Gunn 2008; Johnson, Jr. 2001; Sobolewski and King 2005; Wood and Covington 2014). Countless studies indicate the degree to which the romantic relationships of unmarried parents influence father involvement (Burton 1990; Edin and Nelson 2013; Fagan and Palkovitz 2007; Friend et al. 2016; Gavin et al. 2002; Krishnakumar and Black 2003). For example, one study concluded that the quality of the romantic relationship between African-American fathers and mothers determined the level of involvement fathers have with their children (Gavin et al. 2002). In a similar study, the authors discovered that when parents had amicable relationships, no barriers to father involvement existed (Krishnakumar and Black 2003). However, whenever romantic relationships dissolved between parents, family instability and complexity became prevalent.

Equally important, economically challenged men father children sooner and married less frequently than their higher-income peers (Nock 2007). If they should marry, their divorce rates are much higher (Cherlin 2010). This is especially true for African-American fathers. Several significant factors have been cited as predictors of whether parents remain together.

Whereas father’s economic stability, mothers’ education status, pro-marriage attitudes, and relationship quality all positively correlate with the prospect of marriage, specifically for African-American fathers, multi-partner fertility, and mothers’ suspicions of their infidelity led them to marry less frequently (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004). Additional research on the subject even concluded that fathers’ multi-partnered fertility was a stronger predictor of union instability than mothers’ multi-partnered fertility (McLanahan 2011). This is because fathers’ share resources...
(time and money) between multiple households, which creates the atmosphere for conflict to arise within their relationship (McLanahan 2009). Qualitative research on the topic also reveals that mothers become envious about the time fathers spend with their children who live in other households, including jealously about the time fathers spend with the mother(s) of their child(ren) (Monte 2007). Therefore, nonmarital romantic relationships are the conduit through which most low-income African-American men become fathers (Augustine, Nelson, and Edin 2009), once union dissolution becomes clear, many of these men confront obstacles sustaining positive coparenting relationships with their child’s (or children’s) mother(s) (Friend et al. 2016). Once their children reach five years-of-age, high partnership instability becomes increasingly common (McLanahan 2009).

The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (FFCW) discovered that as children age, the relationships between their parents become increasingly unstable (McLanahan et al. 2003). During the birth of their child, nearly 90 percent of mothers and fathers intended to marry. However, by the time of the five-year follow-up interview, less than 30 percent of cohabiting mothers entered into a marital union with the father of their child. Additionally, 45 percent of cohabitating mothers were no longer romantically involved with their focal child’s father (Fragile Families Research Brief 2007), which led to declines in paternal involvement (Waller 2002). Thus, forcing scholars to evaluate the accuracy of the “package deal” thesis (Tach, Mincy, and Edin 2010). Previous studies offer common explanations as to why paternal involvement is limited for fathers, from the perspective of mothers and fathers.

Waller (2002:82) noted that mothers often limited paternal involvement in situations where fathers were “emotionally incapable” of fulfilling their responsibilities as parents. Furthermore, mothers felt as if they were forced to assume a bulk of the parenting responsibilities whenever fathers started new families. Additionally, whenever mothers found new romantic partners to help
offset the social, emotional, and financial responsibilities of parenting, many of them felt fathers purposely withdrew themselves from their children’s lives (Waller 2002). McLanahan observed a similar pattern among mothers participating in the FFCW study (2009). In contrast, many fathers are adamant about remaining engaged in the lives of their children, regardless if they enter into new romantic relationships (Edin and Nelson 2013; Tach et al. 2010).

From the perspective of nonresidential African-American fathers, many of them sense that mothers purposely restrict their involvement with their children - a practice commonly referred to as “maternal gatekeeping” (Allen and Hawkins 1999) - whenever they are unable to offer financial support to their children (Edin, Nelson, and Reed 2011). Fathers also believe mothers behave irrationally and limit their access to their children in retaliation to them entering into new romantic relationships (Waller 2002).

As revealed in The Parents and Children Together (PACT) national fatherhood evaluation (Waller 2002), nonresident African-American fathers described their relationships with the mothers of their children as unpredictable, conflictual, and ripe with tension. Their co-parenting relationships became exceedingly volatile as frequent skirmishes transpired between fathers and mothers (Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015). Once reconciliation became unlikely between parents, some mothers purposely denied fathers access to their children. As a consequence, some fathers fume at the audacity of mothers to deny them access to their children, leading many of them to become disheartened, dispirited, dismayed, disenchanted, and disengaged (Friend et al. 2016). Antagonistic relationships between mothers and fathers pose considerable threats to father involvement for African-American men. As if raising their children in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantaged was not already a significant obstacle to surmount.
2.3 Neighborhood Factors: Exploring How Neighborhoods of Concentrated Disadvantage Influence Father Involvement Among African-American Men

In recent decades, a veritable “neighborhood effects” research explosion has occurred, with a particular emphasis on African-Americans (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering 2010; Massey and Denton 1993; Sampson 2011; Sharkey 2013; Wilson 1987, 1996). Notably, much of this scholarship reflects the degree to which growing up in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage negatively affects child, adolescent, and maternal well-being (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 2000; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Riina et al. 2013; Sampson 2011; Vinikoor-Imler et al. 2011) – especially in the areas of physical and cognitive development (Kimbro, Brooks-Gunn, and McLanahan 2011; Sampson, Sharkey, and Raudenbush 2008), child maltreatment risk (Coulton et al. 2007; Coulton, Korbin, and Su 1999; Maguire-Jack 2014; Maguire-Jack et al. 2015), intergenerational mobility (Chetty et al. 2014; Chetty, Hendren, and Katz 2016; Chetty and Hendren 2016a, 2016b; Sharkey 2009), and crime and violence exposure (Morenoff and Sampson 1997; Sampson and Raudenbush 2004; Sharkey 2010; Sharkey and Torrats-Espinosa 2017; Wilson 1987). Typically left out of such studies, however, are African-American fathers.


In African-American communities, violence exposure is often multifaceted as it manifests itself in three unique forms – neighborhood-level community violence, law enforcement
malpractice, and racially motivated attacks (Johnson, Jr., Rich, and Keene 2016). For example, African-American youth are victimized by gang and gun violence, stabbings, and murders more than their racial and ethnic peers (Caldwell et al. 2002; Johnson, Jr., Pate, and Givens 2010; Lambert et al. 2010). African-American male youth are especially at-risk given gun violence is their leading cause of death (CDC 2017; Fowler et al. 2017), which is a function of proximity murder due to residential segregation patterns (Logan 2011). Understanding that their children are overly exposed to interpersonal violence, African-American fathers are keenly aware of their responsibility to safeguard their children while in public (Roy 2004a; Threlfall, Seay, and Kohl 2013).

Furthermore, compared to their racial and ethnic peers, African-American youth are much more likely to be affected by police brutality, misconduct, and abuse as a result of their excessive interactions with law enforcement (Carbado and Rock 2016; Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda 2016; Hill 2017; Murch 2015; Richardson 2015). Due to law enforcement officials intensifying their stop, question, and frisk procedures (Lacoe and Sharkey 2016), many African-American youth have become even more distrustful of police officers as they perceive their encounters with them as unjust (Shedd 2015), or at times sexually inappropriate (Butler 2017:98–103). Empirical evidence even suggests that racially motivated attacks (e.g., George Michael Zimmerman’s killing of Trayvon Martin) uniquely affect African-American youth (Boyles 2015), and have lethal consequences for African-American boys in particular (Butler 2017; Johnson, Jr. et al. 2016). In light of such events, many African-American fathers fear for the lives of their sons, or even worse, mourn their tragic death.

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4 The groundless “black-on-black” crime thesis is routinely evoked by uniformed segments of the United States citizenry. Such a supposition overlooks the fact that from 1980 to 2008, whereas 93 percent of African-American homicide victims were killed by African-American offenders, 84 percent of White homicide victims were killed by White offenders. Thus, refuting the “black-on-black” crime hypothesis (Cooper and Smith 2011).
Essayist, Ta-Nehisi Coates, captivatingly articulated his trepidations as an African-American father in an open letter to his son (Coates 2015a). Compelled to have an earnest conversation with his son about the skepticism many African-Americans have toward the justice system, Coates (2015a:11) despondently wrote:

That was the week you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free. The men who had left his body in the street like some awesome declaration of their inviolable power would never be punished. It was not my expectation that anyone would ever be punished. But you were young and still believed. You stayed up til 11 p.m. that night, waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when instead it was announced that there was none you said, “I’ve got to go,” and you went into your room, and I heard you crying. I came in five minutes after, and I didn’t hug you, and I didn’t comfort you, because I thought it would be wrong to comfort you. I did not tell you it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay.

In another example, following Trayvon Martin’s murder at the hands of a rogue vigilante, Tracy Martin, father of Trayvon Martin, explained the insufferable pain he felt once arriving at his son’s murder scene:

Coming from where I did, the sight of a dead body, or a crime scene, was hardly news – until one day it was my son whose body was surrounded by the yellow police investigation tape. I’ve known death before – both of my parents are deceased, I’ve had friends shot and killed, relatives who passed away young from accidents and disease. This was all part of growing up in East St. Louis. But even then, nothing compares to the loss of a child. It’s a different level of hurt than anything I’ve known, a hurt that sears your mind, body, and soul, that never subsides (Fulton and Martin 2017:19).

Trayvon Martin’s murder also aroused the sensibilities of African-American male aristocrats, particularly those historically appointed to the executive branch of the federal government.

Speaking before an august crowd at the 2013 NAACP Convention, former U.S. Attorney General, Eric Holder, detailed the conversation he had with his 15-year-old son following Trayvon Martin’s murder:

Trayvon’s death last Spring caused me to sit down to have a conversation with my own 15-year-old son, like my dad did with me. This was a father-son tradition I hoped would not need to be handed down. But as a father who loves his son and who is more knowing in the ways of the world, I had to do this to protect my boy. I am his father and it is my responsibility, not to burden him with the baggage of eras long gone, but to make him aware of the world he must still confront (2013).
Traveling in the same vein as Attorney General Holder’s remarks, are a set of pensive comments offered by former-President Barack Obama:

You know, when Trayvon Martin was first shot, I said that this could have been my son. Another way of saying that is Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago. And when you think about why, in the African-American community at least, there’s a lot of pain around what happened here, I think it’s important to recognize that the African-American community is looking at this issue through a set of experiences and a history that doesn't go away (President Barack Obama 2013).

In the African-American community, unfortunately, horrid incidents of this nature are more than modern-day catastrophes. They have historical precedence; particularly in the South where the “tripartite system of racial domination” (e.g., economic, political, and personal oppression) ruthlessly undergirded the privileges enjoyed by white society (Morris 1986:1).

During the Civil Rights Movement, African-American fathers dreaded what the future held for their daring children involved in the freedom struggle. For example, Martin Luther King, Sr., father of Civil Rights icon, Martin Luther King, Jr., continuously worried about his son. As LaRossa (2011:175) vividly described:

Another concerned father was Martin Luther King Sr., affectionately known as Daddy King. He was uncomfortable with developments in Montgomery and was especially troubled by the large numbers of arrest. The elder King feared that his son would be sent to prison for a lengthy period on a trumped-up charge. When the younger King came home to Atlanta to visit his family in February of 1956, Daddy King called together a select group of friends to urge his son not to return to Montgomery – at least for a while, “until things cooled down.” Martin Luther King Jr. told his father that he had to go back, that he refused to “hide.” Stunned, the father “burst into tears.”

Be that as it may, only once the NAACP vowed to support Martin Luther King Jr. legally, did Daddy King’s fear diminish. From that point forward, “He was going to stick by his son. He would accompany him to the jailhouse.” (Branch 1988:175–76).

The pervasiveness of such violence in the African American community has led University of Chicago researchers to develop an intervention strategy. If effective, the intervention will assist
minority fathers, especially African-American fathers, in their efforts to prevent their sons from falling victim to neighborhood-level violence in the post-Ferguson era (Johnson, Jr. et al. 2016). It is often the case that African-American fathers subjected to raising their children in violence induced neighborhoods also reside in communities where job opportunities are practically nonexistent (Simms et al. 2013).

2.4 Structural Factors: The Effects of Economic Restructuring, Mass Incarceration, and Child Support Policies on African American Fathers

The bleak employment prospects for African-American men, due to economic restructuring, residential segregation, and pervasive racial discrimination (Massey 2016; Massey and Denton 1993; Pager and Shepherd 2008; Wilson 1987, 1996, 2016), negatively affects them and places their neighborhoods at a geographic disadvantage. In other words, African-American men tend to live in neighborhoods where unemployment is widespread, which is a result of spatial mismatch (Ferguson 2001). According to John Kain (1968), spatial mismatch theory explains why unemployment rates tend to be higher in inner-city neighborhoods for three distinct reasons: 1) well-paying jobs for low-skilled workers relocated to the suburbs faster than African-American Americans; 2) housing discrimination prevented inner-city African-Americans from following the jobs to the suburbs; 3) the distance and limited transportation made it nearly impossible for African-Americans to travel to where jobs had located, thereby exacerbating African-American unemployment.

Harknett and McLanahan (2004) noted that in many of America’s most populated cities, a vast majority of African-American men are jobless. On average, there are “46 employed African-American males per 100 females in the twenty Fragile Families cities. In comparison, there are about 80 employed males per female in the Hispanic and White groups.” (Fragile Families Research Brief 2004). According to Harknett and McLanahan (2004), the “undersupply” of
employed African-American men explains why African-American parents are 2.5 times less likely
to marry following a non-marital birth compared to White and Hispanic parents. While significant,
the tenuous labor market status of low-skilled African-American men does not adequately explain
the racial differences in marriage as African-Americans are less likely to marry than Whites,
regardless of their socioeconomic position (Bent-Goodley 2014; Cherlin 1992). Nonetheless,
qualitative research offers valuable insight into how African-American men perceive their
employment woes while residing in communities where jobs are scarce (Holcomb, Edin, Max, A.
Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015; Johnson, Jr. 2003; Young, Jr. 2004b; Young, Jr.
and Holcomb 2007).

While it has become increasingly apparent that minimal-skill jobs have “disappeared” for
many low-income African-American men (Council of Economic Advisers 2016; Wilson 1996),
alternative understandings suggest that jobs are actually available, albeit in the underground market
(Venkatesh 2009). Evident in the scholarship of Edin and Nelson (2004) and Holcomb and
colleagues (2015), in the absence of formal work, many low-skilled African-American fathers rely
on illegal or unregulated economies to support themselves and their children financially.

Given the prevailing gendered and racialized narratives attached to disadvantaged African-
American fathers (Young, Jr. 2017), casual observers may interpret their unlawful conduct as proof
of their alleged immorality. Yet rarely, as Young persuasively argues (2018), does society consider
the “problematic” behavior of African-American men as symptomatic of larger societal maladies:
the stern unwillingness of American society to recognize the humanity of African-American men
and our nation’s stubborn disinclination to appropriately invest in their human capital. The “Black
Prophetic Fire” voiced by one of the most instrumental figures in the pre-Civil War and
Reconstruction era (West 2015), Fredrick Douglass, epitomizes the spirit Young (2018) channeled
by while advancing his swaying argument. Douglass forthrightly stated:
Yet people in general will say they like colored men as well as any other, but in their proper place! They assign us that place; they don’t let us do it for ourselves, nor will they allow us a voice in the decision. They will not allow that we have a head to think, and a heart to feel, and a soul to aspire. They treat us not as men, but as dogs… That's the way we are liked. You degrade us, and then ask why we are degraded – you shut our mouths, and then ask why we don’t speak… (1841:2).

When such dehumanization occurs, the disquieting cloud of hopelessness looms over the heads of marginalized African-American men, leading some of them to act out of accordance with societal norms. Sadly, their “problematic” conduct can alienate them from mainstream society (Young, Jr. 2018), which is a situation dreadfully exacerbated should they bear the mark of a criminal record (Pager 2009).

Mass incarceration has emerged as the leading social issue of our generation. Under the guise of a “War on Drugs” campaign (Alexander 2012), the United States now incarcerates a larger fraction of its population than any other advanced industrialized society (National Research Council 2014). In 1980, U.S. state and federal prisons warehoused 400,000 inmates (Sentencing Project 2015). By 2015, that figure rose to a dismal 2.2 million, more than any other country on our planet (Sentencing Project 2015). In addition to the 2 million plus inmates languishing in U.S. prisons, awaiting a “lifetime of discrimination, scorn, and exclusion” (Alexander 2012:182) once they re-enter society, there are another 5.1 million individuals under community correctional supervision (e.g., probation or parole) (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2009). To complicate matters further, incarceration is stratified by geographic location, race, and gender (Alexander 2012; Sampson and Loeffler 2010; Pettit 2012; Sykes and Pettit 2014; National Research Council 2014:283–302).

Mass imprisonment exacts an excruciating toll on neighborhoods characterized by excessive levels of poverty, unemployment and joblessness, and racial segregation (National Research Council 2014:283–302; Sampson and Loeffler 2010). Given African-Americans are more likely to live in areas of concentrated disadvantage (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997), their
neighborhoods endure the incessant burden of intrusive police surveillance (Logan and Oakley 2017; National Research Council 2014:283–302; Pattillo 1999; Sampson 2011). For example, from 1990 – 2005, glaring inconsistencies in the Chicago incarceration rate emerged as predominately African-American communities (e.g., Austin, East Garfield Park, and West Garfield Park) experienced an imprisonment rate increase of 50 percent, whereas southwest and northwest communities (predominately white) were unscathed by the imprisonment boom (Sampson and Loeffler 2010). In a follow-up study, Sampson (2011:113) noticed that West Garfield had a prison admission rate more than 40 times greater than that of the highest-ranked white community, wherein African-American men were disproportionately affected (Peck and Theodore 2008; Street 2002).

Over the past three decades, widespread unemployment, draconian drug sentencing policies, and the intensified policing of urban areas help to explain African-American men’s disproportionate imprisonment status (Goffman 2014; Logan and Oakley 2017; Western and Wildeman 2009). In fact, research suggests that mass incarceration is largely responsible for the 1.5 million African-American men “missing” from their families and communities (Wolfers et al. 2015). African-American men are more likely to wear their felony record as a badge of inferiority when compared to other racial, ethnic, and gender groups (Alexander 2012; Pager 2009). While the lifetime risk of imprisonment for all African-American men is 33 percent (Sentencing Project 2015), national and state-specific estimates suggest between 60 - 90 percent of African-American men without a high school degree have acquired a felony record (Kearney et al. 2014; Pettit and Western 2004; Raphael et al. 2004). Despite the unprecedented declines in violent crime and incarceration in recent years (Carson and Anderson 2016; President Barack Obama 2017; Sharkey 2018), at the beginning of 2016, roughly 9 percent of all young African-American men (ages 20-34) remained locked behind bars, a rate nearly 6 times that of white men (1.6%) (Pettit and Sykes...
For those who reenter society, they confront a range of barriers to reentry as they are lawfully denied public housing, encounter housing discrimination in the private rental market, are prohibited from accessing public benefits (e.g., food stamps and Medicaid), and are forbidden from acquiring a wide variety of professional licenses (Alexander 2012; Freudenberg et al. 2005; Harding et al. 2014). A large number of these ex-offender African-American men are fathers (Glaze and Maruschak 2010).

As a consequence of their incarceration history, not only do African-American fathers have irregular contact with their children (Young, Jr. 2018:20–22), but they also become loosely connected to friends and family members capable of offering them job referrals (Mincy et al. 2015; Smith 2017). The mass imprisonment of African-American fathers also contributes to the decline in “marriageable men” in African-American communities (Western and Lopoo 2004).

Additionally, a loss in annual and lifetime earnings accompanies them once released from prison as employers are reluctant to hire them (Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll 2001, 2003; Mincy et al. 2015; Pager 2009). National estimates suggest that of the 74,000 African-American fathers reentering society yearly, their combined lost in annual earnings far exceeds $600 million (Joseph 2010). This economic insecurity hinders fathers’ ability to financially support their children (Geller, Garfinkel, and Western 2011). Low-income, African-American fathers in such precarious economic straits could become even more downwardly mobile should they have an open child support order.

Mid-way into the 1970s, novel policies surfaced in an effort to collect child support from noncustodial fathers. These child support enforcement policies emerged at a time when the structure of American families were undergoing significant change (e.g., growth in female-headed households, rise in non-marital births, and high divorce rates) (Cherlin 1978, 2004, 2010; U.S. Department of Labor 1965). Oblivious to the effects of these societal shifts on family formation
(Johnson, Jr. 2014), elected officials held unwed fathers personally responsible for the steep rise in children receiving public assistance (Mincy et al. 2015:113–14).

Leading the political charge to recovery welfare costs from unwed fathers was Senate Finance Committee Chair and Majority Whip, Senator Russell Long. Senator Long “observed that the cost of cash assistance, two-thirds of which was paid by the federal government, was being thrust upon the public because fathers had abandoned their children.” (Mincy et al. 2015:114).

Disgusted by these figures, Senator Long sponsored the 1975 legislation that eventually became the Child Support Enforcement Program {Title IV-D of the Social Security Act of 1935} (Cancian, Meyer, and Han 2011). The Child Support Enforcement Program was established to (1) lessen public expenditures for actual and potential welfare recipients by requiring noncustodial parents to financially support their children (e.g., welfare cost-recovery), and (2) require paternity establishment for children born out-of-wedlock so that child support can be collected (Solomon-Fears 2016). However, as political debates intensified during the 1980s in reference to “father failure,” “deadbeat dads,” and the “failed welfare state” (Blankenhorn 1996; Murray 1984), Congress amended Title IV-D of the Social Security Act and authorized the Family Support Act of 1988 (Mills 2010).

The new welfare reform law strengthened federal child support guidelines, while also establishing infractions for noncustodial parents, many of whom were nonresident fathers, failing to meet their child-support obligations (Mills 2010). Additionally, the Family Support Act of 1988 established guidelines for States to create child support award formulas, while also creating mechanisms through which States could withhold the wages of “absentee parents,” mainly never-married fathers (Huang 2006b). At a press conference held in the Rose Garden of the White House, President Ronald Reagan callously remarked:

These reforms are designed to ensure that parents who do not live with their children nevertheless meet their responsibilities to them. To improve the adequacy
of child-support awards, judges and other officials will be required to apply support
guidelines developed by their States for setting award amounts. And to help ensure
that the child support awarded actually is paid, child-support payments will be
automatically withheld from the responsible parent's paycheck (1988).

Despite the enactment of this new legislation, widespread outcries continued from the
American public over the nation’s fraying welfare system. Their ardent discontent compelled
President William J. Clinton to acquiesce with public and private demands to overhaul AFDC, as
many concluded it promoted welfare dependency. AFDC was considered the lynchpin of the
American welfare state. Temporary Assistance for Needy Children (TANF) replaced AFDC when
President Clinton signed The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of
1996 (PRWORA) into law. PROWORA had two basic objectives: (1) it imposed 5-year time limits
on the period of time families could receive federal income support; and (2) called for stricter child
support collection and enforcement tactics (Haskin 2006).

Regrettably, it is impossible to discern if nonresidential African American fathers
disproportionately enter the child support system. This uncertainty stems from the fact that the
Office of Child Support Enforcement does not collect race-specific data on noncustodial parents
with open child support orders and unpaid arrears (Pate, Jr. 2016:129), among other demographic
characteristics. Nevertheless, research suggests that noncustodial African-American fathers are
overwhelmingly represented in the child support system (Sorensen 1999). Qualitative studies also
indicate that noncustodial African-American fathers, especially those who are low-income,
disproportionately encounter significant obstacles when interacting with the child support system
(Clary et al. 2017; Pate, Jr. 2002). Therefore, of the 5.5 million parents behind on their child
support, owing more than $114 billion in child support arrears (Office of Child Support
Enforcement 2017), it is reasonable to assume a large number of these delinquent payees are
African-American fathers.
Noncustodial African-American fathers, as all noncustodial parents, enter into the child support system one of two ways (Primus 2006). One option is for the custodial parent (typically the mother) to file a petition demanding child support. Another possibility is for the State to request child support from the noncustodial parent (typically the father) on the behalf of the custodial parent, especially if the father has a child whose custodial parent is applying for TANF services (Pate, Jr. 2016). In this event, the custodial parent requesting TANF benefits must cooperate with the child support enforcement agency and assign their child support rights to the state (Primus 2006). In doing so, states have the legal jurisdiction to collect child support from the noncustodial parents of welfare-reliant children so they can reimburse taxpayers (Pate, Jr. 2010).

Nonresident African-American fathers of welfare-reliant children usually fall behind on their child support due to acquiring unrealistically high child-support orders (Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. A. Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015). Ideally speaking, the child support orders of nonresident African American fathers should coincide with their actual income. However, this rarely occurs. Instead, their child support orders are typically based on their “imputed income”\(^5\) opposed to their real earnings (Cancian et al. 2011; Haskin 2006; Mills 2010; Primus 2006). This is especially the case for low-income, nonresident African-American fathers who are expected to allocate a larger share of their income to child support than higher-income noncustodial parents (Huang, Mincy, and Garfinkel 2005). Pearson and colleagues (2003) concluded that nonresident fathers positioned at the bottom rung of the income distribution saw anywhere between 21 and 61 percent of their monthly earnings applied to their child support order. However, for nonresident fathers with more robust incomes, their child support orders fluctuated between 8 and 21 percent

\(^5\) Commonly used in most states, the income imputations method is used by family court judges when a noncustodial parent fails to show for court or provide proof of income during his or her court visit, or if he or she is unemployed or underemployed. In this event, the judge calculates the imputed earnings of the noncustodial parent by multiplying the minimum wage by 40 hours per week, which may exceed (or be less than) the noncustodial parent’s actual earnings (Brown 2000; Cancian, Meyer, and Han 2011).
(Pearson et al. 2003). After paying their excessively high child support orders, many low-income, nonresident African-American fathers fall into poverty as they struggle to financially support themselves (Clary et al. 2017; Primus 2006).

Another category of low-income, nonresident African-American fathers are chronically unemployed and jobless (Edin and Nelson 2013; Holzer and Offner 2004; Mincy et al. 2015). For this classification of fathers, poverty is an inescapable reality for them regardless if they are required to pay child support. They tend to accumulate excessive arrearages, or debts, as a consequence of nonpayment of their child support (Mills 2010; Mincy et al. 2015). For example, when Kaufman (2005) published her New York Times article in 2005, men earning $10,000 per year or less accounted for roughly 70 percent of the $96 billion then owed in unpaid child support. Sorensen, Sousa, and Schaner (2007) reached a similar conclusion in their study assessing child support arrears in nine large states. The same is also true for incarcerated African-American fathers, even though there is no realistic way for them to pay their outstanding child support debt while they are imprisoned (Office of Child Support Enforcement 2012).

Additionally, in TANF cases, most states only allow up to $50 of the child support payments collected from noncustodial fathers to “pass-through” to custodial parents (Haskin 2006; Primus 2006). In other words, welfare-reliant children do not benefit from the child support typically paid by their fathers (Pate, Jr. 2005). Both noncustodial and custodial parents of children receiving TANF benefits become frustrated with this federal mandate, especially fathers as they deem this practice to be unbeneificial to their children due to none of their hard-earned money going to their progeny. As a result of their dissatisfaction with this rule, many noncustodial and custodial parents circumvent the formal child support system. In its place, they rely on informal

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6 Most states view incarceration as “voluntary unemployment,” and do not allow obligors to modify their child support order even if they become incarcerated (Meyer and Warren 2011). Consequently, the average incarcerated parent with a child support case has $10,000 in arrears when entering state prison, and leaves with $20,000 in arrears (Office of Child Support Enforcement 2012).
child support arrangements to financially support their children (Edin et al. 1997; Johnson et al. 1999; Kane, Nelson, and Edin 2015; Roy 1999).

Another way noncustodial parents provide for their children is through in-kind (noncash) support. Research findings from Kane, Nelson, and Edin (2015) suggest that one-quarter (25%) of the total support provided to the custodial parents in their sample was comprised of in-kind support. On average, these in-kind supports were valued at $60 worth of goods per month (Kane et al. 2015). Furthermore, the authors concluded that:

Overwhelmingly, fathers think of their contributions in relational, rather than financial, terms. In other words, they are less concerned about paying their fair share of the expenses the mother incurs for food, shelter, and other household needs and more concerned with the bond their contributions can forge with their noncustodial children (Kane et al. 2015:603).

A recent U.S. Census report confirms the degree to which noncustodial parents offer in-kind support to the mothers of their children. Relying on the most up-to-date data from the Child Support Supplement (CSS), Grall (2018) concluded that 61.3% of noncustodial parents provided their child with some form of noncash support. African-American fathers lacking stable employment are especially inclined to offer their children informal and in-kind support (Craigie 2012; Jarrett et al. 2002; Johnson et al. 1999; Maldonado 2006; Nelson, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2002).

Due to some fathers attempting to subvert the formal child support system, child support enforcement policies intensified under PROWORA. Under the 1996 federal law, child-support enforcement sanctions now include license revocation (e.g., professional, occupational, recreational, and driver’s licenses) and financial penalties (e.g., tax refund intercepted, and property liens imposed) (Mincy et al. 2015; Pate, Jr. 2002). Another punitive child support enforcement tactic is incarceration (Mills 2010; Mincy et al. 2015; Pate, Jr. 2016; Primus 2006).
Incarceration is typically used as a last resort to penalize those noncustodial parents who are unwilling, or unable, to pay their child support (Solomon-Fears, Smith, and Berry 2012). There is no national data available regarding the number of people incarcerated due to unpaid child support (Pratt 2016). Despite this data shortage, research suggests that incarceration for unpaid child support is a significant problem for noncustodial parents, especially those who are indigent (Patterson 2008). Disadvantaged African-American fathers are particularly at-risk for being incarcerated for child support non-payments, which results in many of them developing elaborate schemes to evade social institutions where law enforcement officials are often present (Clary et al. 2017; Dion et al. 2018; Goffman 2009; Pate, Jr. 2016).

In sum, the general public, journalists, news broadcasters, political pundits, and politicians have embraced the notion of low-income, African American fathers as irresponsible and negligent parents. The deficit perspective in which African-American fatherhood is routinely situated stems from the fact that white, middle-class parenting approaches are often used as the standard of comparison when assessing one’s parenting capabilities (Fagan 2000; Johnson, Jr. 2014; Robinson and Harris 2013). Empirical studies have also been partial towards the traditional nuclear family. In such a family arrangement, children reside in two-parent (biological), married households. Since African American fatherhood is a complex social enterprise, the parenting styles and family formation patterns of the North American majority should not be securely wedded to these men.

The life circumstances of these historically marginalized men suggest that more emphasis be placed on the interrelated factors surrounding their experiences as fathers (Dion et al. 2018; Johnson, Jr. 2014; Mincy and Pouncy 2007; Perry and Johnson, Jr. 2017; Young, Jr. 2004b, 2017, 2018). Low-income, African-American fathers are often undereducated, unemployed or underemployed, and disproportionately affected by ill-considered social and public policies (Mincy et al. 2015, 2006). Furthermore, since African-American families are more likely to reside in (or
near) neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantaged (Pattillo 1999; Sharkey 2013, 2014), African-American fathers are forced to rear their children in communities where public displays of violence are routine (Hamer 2005; Johnson, Jr. et al. 2016; Letiecq 2010; Threlfall et al. 2013). Simply put, the fatherhood experiences of low-income, African American men must be viewed within the context of North American social, economic, educational, and legal disenfranchisement in the post-civil rights era. Therefore, when exploring the lived-experiences of low-income, African American fathers, sufficient theoretical frameworks must be brought to bear when analyzing their current state of affairs.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rarely have theories of race and racism been applied to the study of Black fatherhood. When they are applied, however, these studies are typically theoretical and not empirical (Lemmons and Johnson 2019). With this in mind, one purpose of the current research project is to apply four of the six elements of systemic racism theory (Feagin 2006, 2014) to the study of African-American fatherhood. Another aim of this dissertation study is to utilize Collins’ (2000, 2004) controlling images theory as a theoretical backdrop to understand how low-income African-American fathers challenge race, class, and gender-specific depictions about their perceived inadequacies as parents. Applying Feagin’s (2006, 2014) systemic racism theory and Collins’ (2000, 2004) controlling images theory to my dissertation study will allow me to accomplish the following: (1) understand better how low-income, African-American fathers are affected by contemporary systemic inequities, which manifest themselves along the lines of race, class, and gender-based oppression, and (2) highlight the ways in which low-income, African-American fathers counteract the insidious effects of these interconnected modes of systemic oppression. To this end, the following sections briefly explain the central tenets of systemic racism theory and the
controlling images theory, and why I argue they are ideal theoretical frameworks to use for the purposes of my dissertation.

3.1 Systemic Racism Theory

According to Feagin (2014:13), systemic racism theory accentuates how the U.S. hierarchical system of racial oppression is “centered on rationalizing white-on-black domination.” Since Black Africans were involuntary brought to the US, a systemic racism framework has oppressed African-Americans materially, socially, and ideologically at all institutional levels of society. In fact, as Feagin accents, anti-black racism is the bedrock on which the United States was built and any claim suggesting otherwise is a fallacy (Feagin 2014). Systemic racism, Feagin argues, is more than an inconsequential component of U.S. society. To the contrary, it is the foundational platform on which white-on-black oppression stands to spread its gruesomely repressive tentacles.

Following in the footsteps of a cadre of intellectuals and activists dedicated to dismantling systemic racism (Douglass 1841; Du Bois 1920, 2009; Ture and Hamilton 1967; Walker 1829; Wells-Barnett 1892), Feagin makes the case that the hierarchical racial oppression of the present is eerily similar to the racial tyranny of the past. As Feagin contends, the prolonged existence of white-on-black domination is buttressed by six major dimensions of racial oppression, all of which amalgamate to form systemic racism theory. For the sake of brevity, the ensuing paragraphs will only describe the four aspects of systemic racism theory relevant to my dissertation study. Subsection heading

3.1.1 Unjust Impoverishment and Unjust Enrichment

The first key aspect of systemic racism theory being applied to this dissertation study is *unjust enrichment* and *unjust impoverishment*. According to Feagin (2014:11), this particular aspect of systemic racism viciously perpetuates the racial wealth divide within white and black
communities. For example, white Americans, particularly members of the planter class, ruthlessly exploited free African and African-American labor and amassed immense sums of wealth as a result of this resource extraction during the antebellum era. Due to their subservient societal position as chattel slaves, enslaved Blacks became the carcasses on which affluent white Americans feasted upon to obtain their massive socioeconomic fortunes. As one would reasonably conclude, due to the exploitative and oppressive tactics of opulent white Americans, slave laborers of African descent were effectively denied opportunities to accumulate any form of wealth. Despite being promised forty acres and a mule as compensation for their unpaid slave labor following the Civil War, emancipated Blacks were even prevented from acquiring the publicly-funded land grants new European immigrants obtained (Feagin 2006:3); thereby, perpetuating the undeserved enrichment of whites and assimilated European immigrants.

Consequently, the unjust enrichment that previous generations of white families have enjoyed has been socially reproduced over time. The vast wealth and socioeconomic resources whites stockpiled in early periods of U.S. history have become family heirlooms that have been passed down over time. These unjustly gained material inheritances allowed subsequent generations of whites “to provide much better educational, housing, and other socioeconomic opportunities for their children than the later generations of black Americans whose ancestors did not receive access to such wealth-generating resources because of massive racial discrimination and segregation” (Feagin 2006:4). The intergenerational transmission of unjust impoverishment for white Americans operates alongside the social reproduction of unjust impoverishment for African-Americans, which is aided and abetted by contemporary forms of racial oppression and discrimination that force the extraordinary costs and burdens of systemic racism to rear their dreadful heads.
3.1.2 The Costs and Burdens of Racism

The second key aspect of systemic racism theory being applied to this dissertation study is the costs and burdens of racism (Feagin 2014:11). Feagin argues that the unjust immiseration Black Americans experience due to systemic racism produces a slew of negative effects in their lives. For example, due to the stark racial wealth gaps that exist between white and Black communities (Hamilton et al. 2015; Oliver and Shapiro 1994; Shapiro 2004), Black parents tend to have less social and economic capital to draw upon when attempting to improve the upward mobility of their children. Furthermore, the rampant labor market discrimination African-American men encounter on the account of their race can either lead to involuntary unemployment, occupational segmentation, or inadequate wages (Hamilton, Austin, and Darity, Jr. 2011). Additionally, the costs and burdens of racism also prohibits parents from accessing the necessary economic, educational, and social resources required for them to realize their own dreams and adequately provide for their children (Feagin 2014:219). Lastly, the costs and burdens of racism also tend to play themselves out through legalized discrimination in the areas of housing (Geller and Curtis 2011) and voting rights (Uggen, Larson, and Shannon 2016), which is ordinarily maintained by white elite men who are committed to preserving an unjust social order (Feagin 2014:24–26).

3.1.3 The Important Role of White Elite Men

The third key aspect of systemic racism theory being applied to this dissertation study is the important role of white elite men (Feagin 2014:11) According to Joe Feagin and Kimberley Ducey (2017), elite white men are the central problem of the 21st century. Feagin and Ducey’s audacious charge patently differs from the one made by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1903, whereby he argued that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (1903:9). One can hardly argue against Du Bois’s contention, especially given the unrelenting racial subordination of nonwhites in
the United States since its inception (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Dyson 2017, 2018; Feagin 2006; Glaude, Jr. 2017; Hill 2017). However, as Feagin and Ducey compellingly argue (2017), elite white men are chiefly responsible for the perpetuation of systemic oppression in the United States. Feagin (2014:24) writes that elite white men “have acted forcefully to create or maintain the social, economic, and political organizations and institutions, as well as conceptual framing, that reflect their interests.”

To prevent Blacks and lower-class whites from rallying around their common social class oppression, historically, elite White men have relied on “racecraft” to ensure societal power remained firmly within their grip. Specifically, as evinced in the colonial era, elite white men used chicanery to convince poor whites that they were racially superior to Blacks, despite both racialized groups being victims of immiseration and capitalist exploitation. However, because poor whites were compensated with a “public and psychological wage (Du Bois 1935:700),” their dire economic situation paled in comparison to the social currency of whiteness they received. Elite white men understood this and consciously devised diabolical schemes so the mass of white laborers would adopt this misguided ideology, even at the expense of their own economic mobility. Dangling the “privileges, opportunities, and cultural resources (Feagin 2014:24)” of whiteness before poor whites has been an age-old tactic deployed by elite white men for their own social, economic, and political gain. In fact, some have argued that Donald Trump would not have been elected as President of the United States without conjuring up the “public and psychological wages of whiteness” (Arlie 2016; Coates 2017). Despite elite White men efforts to permanently relegate African Americans to the margins of society, campaigns of rebellion have been consistently mounted by African-Americans to resist systemic racism.
3.1.4 Resisting Systemic Racism

The fourth key aspect of systemic racism theory being applied to this dissertation study is *resisting racial oppression* (Feagin 2014:11). There has never been a time in U.S. history where African Americans have not been afflicted by structures and institutions of systemic oppression. Yet, while their lives have been upended by systemic oppression, African Americans have also made it their business to challenge the social forces committed to relegating them to the margins of society. Bearing this in mind, Feagin (2006:31) argues that “a very important dimension of systemic racism has been the constant resistance to that racism by African Americans.” Feagin is indeed correct.

From the days of slavery to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, African-Americans have developed wide-ranging strategies to circumvent racialized oppression and make America a truly humane and just society (Holsaert et al. 2012; Khan-Cullors, bandele, and Davis 2018; King, Jr. 1958, 1964, 1968; Mckesson 2018; Morris 1986). Successive generations of African Americans have attempted to counteract, reorganize, and topple racialized oppression. The relentless resistance of marginalized African Americans, historically, has been greeted by white hostility. Nevertheless, far from being deterred, African-Americans have unrelentingly channeled their emotional, physical, and spiritual energies into overturning antiblack oppression (Du Bois 1899:197–219, 2009:151–61; Higginbotham 1993; Warnock 2014). Even when African Americans have found it difficult to vanquish systemic racism, their strong reliance on spirituality has brought them solace and know that a brighter day is on the horizon.

3.2 Controlling Images: Depictions of African American Fatherhood

On the whole, theories about race and racism are undoubtedly crucial when attempting to understand the vast adversities African Americans have historically sought to overcome in the United States. However, it would be a careless oversight to rely exclusively on theories of race and
racism to make sense of the hardships African Americans confront daily. Theoretical formulations that combine intersecting social categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and class are also particularly useful, especially when such theories speak to how and why Black Americans are the incessant victims of societal mistreatment. Theories such as the one Collins (2000, 2004) coined entitled *controlling images* serves as one example.

First introduced in her pathbreaking text *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (2000) contends that the disparate societal mistreatment of Black women occurs because misleading controlling images are used to perpetuate deceitful messages about both social groups. According to Collins (2000), these images are purely shaped by race, class, and gender, and they characterize African-Americans as disinclined or incapable of adapting to dominant ideologies of race and gender. Controlling images, from Collins perspective, rely on the interlocking modes of race, gender, and class-based oppression to disseminate stereotypical messages about African Americans within popular culture for the purposes of legitimizing their societal mistreatment. As Collins (2000:69) persuasively argues, controlling images “are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.” The controlling images used to depict Black masculinity gives credence to Collins’ assertion.

Expanding her earlier work beyond the boundaries of Black femininity, Collins (2004) updates her theory of controlling images and applies it to Black masculinity. In Collins’ (2004:6) words, “Talking about gender does not mean focusing solely on women’s issues. Men’s experiences are also deeply gendered. Thus, gender ideology not only creates ideas about femininity, but it also shapes conceptions of masculinity.” With this in mind, it is equally important to acknowledge that the social norms governing perceptions about Black masculinity – as is the case with Black femininity - is subject to intense scrutiny. The intensified scrutiny of Black men has much to do with how they are affected by the interlocking modes of race, class, and gender-
based oppression. Although most white men are capable of taking advantage of the esteemed social status associated with hegemonic masculinity, which is routinely praised as the gold standard for masculinity, the same cannot be said for Black men, as their masculine performances are almost always marginalized (Connell 1995).

As a consequence, the Black gender ideology that molds notions about Black masculinity tends to validate patterns of discrimination against Black men, particularly those positioned at the bottom rung of the U.S. social ladder (Collins 2004). For example, the controlling image of Black men as violent and criminal has been a routine depiction in the United States (Collins 2004). Historically and contemporarily, gendered and racialized stereotypes have been used to promote these pernicious narratives about African American men. Whether we revisit the highly-acclaimed film Birth of a Nation (originally called The Clansman) (Hamer 2001:22); exhume the “Superpredator” comments of a past-presidential hopeful (Clinton 1996; Dilulio 1995), or shine a steadfast spotlight on the “criminal and thugs” remarks offered by then-President Barack Obama (2015), throughout the annals of U.S. history, the cultural depiction of African-American men has been that of a rapist, violent criminal, or menace to society (Collins 2004).

For example, Color for Change, a nonprofit civil rights advocacy organization, highlighted the pervasiveness of this issue in their report on how families are represented in news and opinion media by race (Dixon 2017). Specifically, the report examined the degree to which mass media outlets misrepresent Black families through their platforms by engaging in inaccurate and racially biased coverage. While four key findings emerged from the report, two of them are especially relevant to the stereotypical depictions of Black men as innately criminal and Black fathers as the prototypical “deadbeat” father.

According to the report (Dixon 2017), which was based on a systematic content analysis that identified and analyzed fatherhood stories published or aired between January 1, 2015 –
December 31, 2016, mass media forums suggest, to an overwhelming degree, that there is a relationship between Black families and criminality. By the same token, however, news and opinion media considerably underrepresent White families’ criminal involvement, thereby misrepresenting “the overall picture of crime and those who commit crime” (Dixon 2017:3). For example, the report finds that news and opinion media are 1.32 times more likely to link criminal behavior to Black families than White families. Specifically, although Blacks represent merely 26 percent of all individuals arrested for criminal offenses, they were reported as criminal assailants nearly 37 percent of the time by news and opinion media. This meant that Blacks were overrepresented as criminals by 11 percentage points. For Whites, the opposite occurred, as they were underrepresented as criminals by the media. The same report discovered that Whites were depicted as criminals by the mass media 28 percent of the time despite constituting roughly 70 percent of all individuals arrested for criminal activity, thereby underrepresenting Whites as criminals by 42 percentage points (Dixon 2017:37–40).

Furthermore, the same report concluded that inaccurate depictions of Black fathers as uninvolved parents flood media airwaves (Dixon 2017), further buttressing the misguided notion that these men have relinquished their parental duties. For example, findings from the report indicated that news anchors reported that Black fathers were portrayed as uninvolved parents 60 percent of the time. In the same report, White fathers were only depicted in such a manner 20 percent of the time (Dixon 2017). The report also concluded that television news networks like Fox News and CNN are primarily responsible for presenting distorted portraits of Black fatherhood to the public (Dixon 2017:36). Compared to White fathers, the television network Fox News depicts Black fathers as being uninvolved parents at a ratio 7 to 0. While lower than the numbers for Fox News, CNN depicts Black fathers as being uninvolved parents at a ratio 2 to 1.
Although Collins never explicitly applied her theory of controlling images conceptual framework to the social institution of African American fatherhood, there is evidence to suggest that African-American fathers have also been the victims of distorted and unfavorable storylines. Purposeful actions have been taken by elite groups to transmit stereotypical images and ideas about African American fatherhood through popular culture since the publication of the Moynihan report, which I argue was the first controlling image crafted about the stereotypical “deadbeat dad” in the Black community. The promulgation of such racist messaging and stereotypes about African American fatherhood spread uncontrollably in the 1980s.

A classic example is Bill Moyers’ CBS Special Report, *The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America* (1986). This documentary cogently vilified African American fathers in the media. As Hamer (2001:24) makes emphatically clear, “Host Bill Moyers blamed supposedly absent noncaring fathers for everything from drug use in black communities and trash-ridden neighborhoods to children’s gang activity and poor academic performance.” At a time when drug addiction proliferated (Kerr 1986), teenage pregnancy rates increased (Dash 1989), welfare dependency skyrocketed (Katz 1989), and violent crime drove the American public to the brink of indignation (Anderson 1990, 1999), Moyers sought to illuminate the disintegration of the African-American family. Moyers sole objective was to evocatively draw viewers “into the lives of the real people behind the ever-mounting statistics chronicling family breakdown” (Edin and Nelson 2013:2). In melodramatic fashion, Moyers accomplished his mission once Timothy McSeed made his documentary debut.

During the interview, McSeed, an African American father of six, heedlessly confessed that he did not provide financial support for any of his offspring. When Moyers probed McSeed on this statement, he nonchalantly explained, “Well, the majority of the mothers are on welfare, and — welfare gives them a stipend for the month. See, what I’m not doing, the government does.”
McSeed’s comments sparked a media frenzy. Following the broadcast, practically every newspaper columnist and news anchor lambasted McSeed for his impetuous remarks. Making him, an African American father, the poster child of “deadbeat dads.”

Concerning low-income, African American fathers, the term “deadbeat dad” is often associated with them for two reasons. First, low-income African American fathers are largely thought of as “deadbeat dads” because of their alleged unwillingness to financially provide for their children. Second, and perhaps most significant, African-American fathers are considered “deadbeat dads” due to gendered and racialized stereotypes depicting them as nonessential, disengaged, irresponsible, emotionally impotent, hypersexual, and absentee parents (Anderson 1990; Coles and Green 2009; Tamis-Lemonda and McFadden 2010; Young, Jr. 2017). In the words of Edin and Nelson (2013:2):

> These men are irresponsible, so the story goes. They hit and then run-run away, selfishly flee, act like boys rather than men. According to these portrayals, such men are interested in sex, not fatherhood. When their female conquests come up pregnant, they quickly flee the scene, leaving the expectant mother holding the diaper bag.

Gendered and racialized images of African American fathers as “deadbeat dads” are principally fueled by the media, whereby elected officials then rely on these media-fueled controlling images to assail African-American fathers for their perceived noninvolvement as parents.

When this occurs, stereotypical narratives of African Americans are reinforced. Former President Barrack Obama’s unbalanced criticism of African American fathers is a striking example. It was Father’s Day, June 15th, 2008. While standing in the pulpit at Apostolic Church of God, presidential-candidate Barack Obama emitted fiery rhetoric about the carelessness of African American fathers. On a day where fathers are praised and commemorated, Obama used this
momentous occasion to berate African American fathers. While addressing the enthusiastic crowd of church attendees, Obama uttered from the rostrum, “We need fathers to realize that responsibility does not end at conception. We need them to realize that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child… any fool can have a child… that doesn't make you a father — it’s the courage to raise one.” Once processing Obama’s words, the African American parishioners exploded in thunderous applause, suggesting they too shared Obama’s sentiments. The tenor of Obama’s Father’s Day speech was perplexing considering he knows all too well how clichéd storylines are detrimental to the public perception of African-American men (2006:233). Nevertheless, Obama’s Father’s Day speech became an overnight internet sensation.

Despite all the hoopla surrounding Obama’s Father’s Day speech, sociologist Michael Eric Dyson was far from impressed. Dyson vehemently condemned Obama’s comments in a Time magazine article (2008). Dyson wrote (2008:1), “Obama’s words may have been spoken to black folk, but they were aimed at those whites still on the fence about whom to send to the White House.” Further, Dyson contended that Obama’s speech disregarded years of research suggesting African-American fathers are actually more involved in the lives of their children than fathers from other racial and ethnic groups (Dyson 2008, 2016b).

Since the publication of Moynihan’s provocative report (U.S. Department of Labor 1965), the issue of so-called “fatherless families” in the African-American community has remained a central fixture in the minds of researchers, politicians, policymakers, and the American public. Consequently, over the past several decades, this popular mischaracterization of African-American fatherhood has led to the development of the responsible fatherhood movement (Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson 1998; Klempin and Mincy 2011; Mincy and Pouncy 2002), spurred new research about “fragile families” (Garfinkel et al. 2001; Reichman et al. 2001), and prompted the federal government to improve data collection efforts on fathers (Nurturing Fatherhood: Improving
Data and Research on Male Fertility, Family Formation and Fatherhood 1998). Policy-relevant fatherhood studies soon followed. These studies tended to prioritize low-income, nonresident African-American fathers as policymakers contended these men were shirking their parental obligations, albeit a claim loosely supported by empirical evidence (Johnson et al. 1999). Many of these studies accentuated African-American fatherhood from a deficit perspective (Perry and Johnson, Jr. 2017:223–26), which is a cultural script that has historically plagued these marginalized men.

Ironically, these cultural narratives persist despite numerous studies indicating that African-American fathers are highly involved in the lives of their children (Cabrera et al. 2008; Caldwell et al. 2014; Coles and Green 2009; Connor and White 2011; Jones and Mosher 2013; King et al. 2004; McAdoo 1993). Unfortunately, such empirical evidence has been slow to reverse the predominant perceptions of these men and fathers. Policymakers and the American public alike, at best, remain conflicted about how to interpret these emerging findings and how to revise the African American father script. Furthermore, despite the ubiquity of such studies, they tend to solely focus on the difficulties Black men have fulfilling traditional fatherhood roles, which limits the supply of available scholarship on the diverse parenting experiences of Black fathers (Johnson and Young, Jr. 2016).

Due to the lack of expansive research on Black fathers, this may also explain why the general public and elected officials have difficulties viewing African American fathers as anything other than negligent parents. Members from both camps may genuinely be unaware of the varied parental experiences of these men because the necessary data has not been collected and responsibly disseminated. Thus, by ripping a page out Joe Feagin’s and Patricia Hill Collins’ theoretical playbooks, I hope to further illuminate how low-income, African American fathers
prevail in the face systemic oppression and challenge the powerful controlling images that influence public perceptions about their supposed proclivities as men and fathers.

4 RESEARCH DESIGN

4.1 Research Questions

The research questions guiding this dissertation study include:

1. How do the key dimensions of systemic racism affect the fatherhood experiences of low-income, African American men?
   a. How does the unjust impoverishment of low-income, African American men affect their experiences as fathers?
   b. How do the costs and burdens of systemic racism affect the fatherhood experiences of low-income, African American men?
   c. How do low-income, African American fathers resist systemic racism?

2. How do low-income, African American men challenge controlling images (e.g., violent criminals and “deadbeat” dads) through their paternal beliefs and behaviors?

4.2 Qualitative Research Approach

To answer my research questions, I utilized the narrative analysis approach (Creswell and Poth 2017:67–74). Narrative analysis was an ideal qualitative data collection strategy considering this particular approach allowed me to situate the individual stories of fathers within their “personal experiences (their jobs, their homes), their culture (racial or ethnic), and their historical contexts (time and place)” (Creswell and Poth 2017:72). Furthermore, narrative analysis is popular among family researchers as it is known to produce greater validity among respondents (Becker 1998), mainly because “expressions of attitudes and meanings emerge naturally” throughout the interview (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016:218). More importantly, narrative analysis is commonly used among family policy researchers when investigating how the interrelated aspects
of African-American men lives influence their attitudes and behaviors as fathers (Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. A. Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015; Pate, Jr. 2002, 2016).

### 4.3 Sample and Sample Selection Criterion

I conducted a secondary analysis of qualitative data collected for a father-centered home visiting study based throughout Metropolitan Atlanta (see, Rostad et al. 2017; Self-Brown et al. 2015, 2017, 2018). The father-centered home visiting study was called Dad2K and was funded by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD). Dad2K is a parenting program designed exclusively for fathers based on the SafeCare parent-child interaction module, which “focuses on teaching fathers 10 Planned Activities Training (PAT) skills to prevent challenging child behavior, how to structure daily routines, and tools to enhance positive interaction with their child” (Self-Brown et al. 2015:141). The study’s objective was to establish a meaningful and engaging approach to delivering SafeCare (an evidence-based home visiting program for the prevention of child maltreatment) home visiting content to at-risk fathers of young children (2-5 years of age) (Rostad et al. 2017; Self-Brown et al. 2015, 2017, 2018). Originally designed as a Randomized Control Trial with quantitative outcomes, after careful deliberation, Dr. Shannon Self-Brown, added a qualitative component to the study, which I led.

A total of 23 African American fathers participated in qualitative interviews. These fathers represent a subsample of a larger study that included 99 fathers. The 23 low-income, African American fathers included in my dissertation study meet the following sample selection criterion, as outlined by the study’s Principal Investigator, Dr. Shannon Self-Brown, Professor of Public Health at Georgia State University:

1. At least 18 years old
2. Identify as male
3. Identify as African-American and/or Black
4. Identify as a biological and/or social father\(^7\)

5. Have at least one child between 2-5 years of age\(^8\)

6. Must be a resident of Metropolitan Atlanta

7. Meet the criteria for two or more potential risk factors for poor parenting outcomes (e.g., low education level, low household income, unmarried, young age at time of first child’s birth).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Father's Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Annual Income</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Milton</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>$5,000 - $9,999</td>
<td>Single (Not living with Partner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jarvis</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>$10,000 - $14,999</td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earl</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>$0 - $4,999</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>$15,000 - $24,999</td>
<td>Single (Not living with Partner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>$10,000 - $14,999</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodger</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>$10,000 - $14,999</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>$5,000 - $9,999</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>$10,000 - $14,999</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>11th</td>
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<td>Julian</td>
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<td>$25,000 - $34,999</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nat</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>$35,000 - $49,000</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>38</td>
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<td>$0 - $4,999</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
</tr>
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<td>12th</td>
<td>$5,000 - $9,999</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darius</td>
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<td>Community or Junior College Graduate</td>
<td>$15,000 - $24,999</td>
<td>Single (Not living with Partner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Community or Junior College Graduate</td>
<td>$25,000 - $34,999</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derrick</td>
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<td>12th</td>
<td>$35,000 - $49,000</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melvin</td>
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<td>11th</td>
<td>$15,000 - $24,999</td>
<td>Single (Not living with Partner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>$25,000 - $34,999</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zion</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>$15,000 - $24,999</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Father’s names provided above are pseudonyms.

\(^7\) A man who is married to or cohabiting with the child’s mother, but is not the biological father (Berger and Langton 2011; Sharon H. Bzostek 2008).

\(^8\) This parameter is introduced because the SafeCare Dads to Kids study aimed to improve the parenting skills and competencies of marginalized fathers with at least one child between 2-5 years of age. Fathers with children in this particular age range were chosen as this child developmental stage is a crucial period of early childhood development.
Fathers participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The purpose of the interview was two-pronged. The first segment of the interviews queried fathers about their impressions of the Dad2K intervention. The latter portion, which is relevant to the current study, explored themes related to the father’s life history (e.g., family background, family structure and living arrangements, relationship with children, romantic relationships, employment history, paternal support, fatherhood attitudes and behaviors, and general fatherhood challenges). These interviews lasted two-hours and were transcribed verbatim. As a member of my dissertation committee, Dr. Self-Brown granted me permission to use the qualitative data for my dissertation study.

These qualitative interviews are of low-income, African American fathers who described their life histories, including the difficulties they encountered as fathers and how those challenges affected their experiences as parents. The African American fathers in my sample are all considered low-income because their annual income is between 0-199% of the federal poverty level. However, I would be remiss should I fail to mention that although my sample is broadly recognized as low-income, within-group income variations exist within my sample that merit momentary consideration.

4.4 Data Management Protocol: Accounting for Ethical Dilemmas in Qualitative Family Research

Since digital recording devices were used for data collection purposes (Johnson, Dunlap, and Benoit 2010; LaRossa 1989), it was standard protocol to transfer recorded interviews to a Microsoft Office content management system called SharePoint, which was only accessed by research personnel with IRB approval. The expectation was for the original interviews to be copied to SharePoint within 24 hours of interview completion. Data storage protocol also required the immediate deletion of the interview from the digital recording device following a successful file transfer. The purpose of doing so was to minimize the possibility of the interview data falling into
the hands of unwarranted and unauthorized parties should the digital recording device be stolen or misplaced. Furthermore, the Family Network Trees (FNT) constructed while interviewing fathers are locked away in a secure file cabinet at Georgia State University, whereby only authorized research personnel has access.

Furthermore, because the collected data would be used for research presentations, prepublication reports, and peer-reviewed journal articles, deliberate efforts were also taken to protect public exposure and self-exposure of the father’s private life (see, LaRossa et al. 1981:309–11). First, unlike quantitative studies wherein confidentiality is achieved through statistical summaries (LaRossa et al. 1981:309), pseudonyms were assigned to fathers to protect their true identities (Allen and Wiles 2016; Creswell and Poth 2017; Lofland et al. 2005; Weiss 1994). Second, although not awarded at the outset of the Dad2K study, all interviewed fathers retroactively benefit from a Certificate of Confidentiality (CoC) since they are technically participants of a National Institutes of Health (NIH) funded study. Given the sensitive information divulged during the face-to-face interviews conducted with fathers, protecting the confidentiality of all interviewed fathers was a pressing priority. Securing a CoC is quite common among scholars who study low-income, African-American fathers (e.g., Johnson et al. 1999; Pate, Jr. 2016). Third, serendipitous information gleaned from the impromptu telephone calls between fathers and the mothers of their children, or the unscripted comments offered by family members during one-on-

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9 In accordance with Section 2012 of the 21st Century Cures Act, which was implemented within the 2017 NIH Certificates of Confidentiality Policy, all ongoing or new research funded by NIH as of December 13, 2016 that is collecting or using identifiable, sensitive information is automatically issued a CoC. The Dad2K study meets this requirement because as of December 13, 2016, the Dad2K study was awarded a No-Cost Extension (NCE) from NIH and Georgia State University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) as fathers were still engaged in behavioral research, in which identifiable, sensitive information was still being collected from them.
one interviews with fathers, that dealt with any aspect of the men’s parenthood experience were not exploited for the purposes of research (LaRossa et al. 1981:308). It was gravely important not to treat the unexpected statements and asides made by fathers’ confidants as empirical data since they never consented to join the empirical study. Addressing this ethical dilemma was vital since fathers’ homes were the primary setting wherein all face-to-face interviews occurred,10 as households are considered an ideal location to conduct qualitative family studies (see, LaRossa et al. 1981:307–8).

4.5 Data Collection Tool

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 23 low-income, African-American fathers. To collect the necessary data from these fathers, a modified version of the interview guide was used from the Parents and Children Together (PACT) qualitative study entitled, *In Their Own Voices: The Hopes and Struggles of Responsible Fatherhood Program Participants in the Parents and Children Together Evaluation* (Appendix C). The qualitative study of the PACT evaluation, conducted by Mathematic Policy Research for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, examined a set of Responsible Fatherhood (RF) and Healthy Marriage (HM) grantees funded by ACF’s Office of Family Assistance (OFA). The PACT qualitative study “provides a rich narrative of the life experiences and circumstances of fathers who enroll in RF programs” (Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. A. Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015:Viii). According to their initial PACT report,

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10 Several low-income, African-American fathers were also interviewed in non-household settings (e.g., run down motels) and in residencies where they were not legal tenets. This sub-category of fathers were victims of housing instability. As a result, they were either residing with friends and family, staying in dilapidated motels, or on the verge of becoming homeless. Empirical studies have documented the causes and consequences of housing instability for low-income, African-American men, especially for those with criminal records (Harris 2008; Herbert, Morenoff, and Harding 2015; Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. A. Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015:62–66; Johnson III and Johnson, Jr. 2010; Rostad et al. 2017:492).
permission to use Mathematica Policy Research’s interview protocol is not warranted since the report is located in the public domain (see, Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. A. Young, Jr., et al. 2015).

Typically, pilot studies are conducted in preparation of a full-scale study (Leon, Davis, and Kraemer 2011). As it pertains to fatherhood research, pilot studies allow researchers to pre-test their qualitative interview guide, so they can identify potential weaknesses in interview protocol (Self-Brown et al. 2018:38–39). Ideally, since I am using a slightly augmented version of the PACT qualitative interview script, I can bypass the pilot testing process. Although the PACT qualitative study was not in Atlanta, the demographic characteristics of its respondents closely mirror those referenced in my dissertation study.

4.6 Data Analysis

The audio-recorded interviews have been transcribed, cleaned and prepared for analysis. Qualitative data analysis commenced using the narrative analysis method (Creswell and Poth 2017). Again, the narrative analysis method is a popular analysis technique when conducting research on low-income, African-American fathers (see, Clary et al. 2017; D’Angelo et al. 2016; Dion et al. 2018; Friend et al. 2016; Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. A. Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015; Pate 2016; Pate, Jr. 2002). After creating demographic profiles for each interviewed father, I used deductive analytic techniques to generate thematic codes and sub-codes. I also used inductive analytical techniques to generate thematic codes (Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. A. Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015:118–20; LaRossa 2005:840–46). The “two separate, though related, activities: (a) denoting and (b) connoting” of the qualitative analysis process proved useful during this phase of analysis (LaRossa 2012b:649–52). Elements of Grounded Theory Methods (GTM), specifically open coding, were utilized for the purposes of qualitatively analyzing data (see, Glaser 1978; LaRossa 2005b; Strauss 1987). After creating my initial codebook, I then moved into the second stage of qualitative analysis, analytic subcoding.
To generate analytic subcodes, I identified commonalities between thematic codes and merged them into broader themes (Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. A. Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015:119–20). Analytic subcodes were then stored in individualized Excel spreadsheets with corresponding quotations from respective fathers. The generated Excel spreadsheets also included code and theoretical memos detailing my reflections about the analysis process (Lofland et al. 2005:210–11), ultimately serving as the foundation for the qualitative findings chapters of my dissertation.

Furthermore, MAXQDA 2018, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program, was used for the analysis. MAXQDA 2018 allowed me to code the transcribed semi-structured, in-depth interviews into meaningful analytical units. Following this process, I used MAXQDA 2018 to create a master codebook that enumerates the structure of themes that appear in the semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The bottom-line themes that emerged frequently throughout the data were given preference in the analytical write-up.

4.7 Positionality as a Qualitative Family Researcher

As a qualitative family researcher studying urban African American fathers – a distinct social group that I belong too – they were surely times when my status as an “extreme insider” (Young, Jr. 2004a:194) afforded me the opportunity to develop a strong rapport with the fathers that I interviewed. Often times, before diving into the interview, I would share stories with fathers about my personal fatherhood journey. Sometimes I would pull my daughter’s picture out of my wallet and show it to the fathers in an effort to establish comfort and trustworthiness. Other times, depending on the time of day, I would FaceTime my daughter so that I could virtually introduce her to the fathers I was set to interview. These rapport building strategies went over well with fathers, as many of them could sense that I was being genuine in my actions to place them at ease
before conducting the interview. I truly believe that by deploying these rapport building tactics I was able to collect rich data from the fathers.

On another note, however, once the interviews started and fathers began sharing their life stories with me, it was apparent that, at times, my status as an “extreme insider” vanished and I became a “compassionate outsider” (Young, Jr. 2004a:194). While me and the fathers that I interviewed shared similar concerns for our children, the magnitude of our concerns markedly varied. For example, many of the fathers that I interviewed poignantly spoke about the emotional pain they experienced when they were physically separated from their children because they incarcerated. While I have shed both physical and invisible tears over missing my daughter (a.k.a baby girl) back in Chicago since starting my Ph.D. program, my emotional pain pales in comparison to that of the fathers I interviewed.

Unlike them, my physical movement was not restricted, and I had the option of travelling to Chicago to see my daughter (depending on my class/work schedule and financial situation) due to me not being under correctional supervision. Although my class/work schedule and financial situation prevented me from traveling to see my daughter as much as I would like, the fact still remains that the circumstances preventing me from seeing my daughter were not the same as most of the fathers that I interviewed. Furthermore, as a Ph.D. student, once I complete my degree the idea is that I will be in a better position financially to support my daughter and subsequent children. For Africa-American fathers returning home from prison or jail, the opposite is true, as their material well-being tends to diminish (Coates 2015b; Harding et al. 2014; Herbert, Morenoff, and Harding 2015).
Chapter 5 focuses on how contemporary forms of systemic racial oppression affected the material well-being of interviewed African American fathers. Throughout this chapter, explicit connections are made highlighting how two of the four key aspects of systemic racism utilized for this dissertation study applied to the narratives of interviewed fathers. The first section speaks to how labor market discrimination and low-wage work contributed to the unjust impoverishment of low-income, African American fathers. In the second section of this chapter, attention is brought to how the extraordinary costs and burdens of systemic racism undercut the self-sufficiency of low-income, African American fathers.

After carefully analyzing the qualitative data, it became immediately apparent that most interviewed fathers experienced some form of labor market discrimination in their adult lives. Due to roughly 75 percent of interviewed fathers (17) having an incarceration history, an overwhelming majority fathers encountered labor market discrimination due to their past involvement with the criminal justice system. Several interviewed fathers also noted that they experienced labor market discrimination based upon their physical appearance and were discriminated against in the workplace, if they were fortunate enough to have a formal sector job.

For example, Calvin, an aspiring rapper and 33-year-old father of three, offers the following reply when asked about his experiences finding work: “I done had bad luck with those. Like, going to look for a job… when you a felon, it’s kinda of hard…. If you a convicted felon, you ain’t finna get a job out there.” Calvin’s words mirror those of Darius’s. Darius is a single father who has a toddler age son. Although Darius completed “4 years” of post-secondary training in “heating” and “air” and is a certified “electrician,” he feels he has spent much time trying to find a job because of
his “felony” record. According to Darius, his felony “record has a lot to do with” his sporadic unemployment.

Darius’s eagerness to acquire work experience from companies who are unwilling to hire him because of this incarceration history is slowly forcing him to become bitter and impatient. From Darius’s viewpoint, the expectations potential employers place on hopeful workers such as himself, who are ex-offenders with short resumes, are unrealistic. As Darius notes, “if you don’t have so much experience, they [hopeful employers] looking at it like you need to start somewhere else. We want you to hit the ground running here. But where do you hit the ground walking at? You know, where are those jobs at? You know, I got to collect this experience from somewhere.” Implicit in Darius’s remarks is the fact that there are few employment opportunities for ex-offender African American fathers like himself to turn their lives around and join the formal economy.

Another father, Don, who is 34-years-of-age with nine children spread across two households, has also been the victim of selective post-hire screening practices that result in labor market discrimination. According to Don, “it’s hard to find a job out here.” Don made this comment after sharing with me that he was abruptly terminated from his place of employment once his background check returned. “They had fired me ‘cause of my background came back. Yeah, I had too many felonies. So, me having too many felonies, they let me go on the spot. Like literally, like, let me go! Told me I can’t work here no more.”

Don’s claim that he was fired due to his felony history warrants a statement about how hiring procedures contribute to racialized labor market discrimination. From Don’s statements, it is unclear if he purposefully withheld information about his incarceration history from employers or lied on his job application. If the latter is the case, then most companies are well within their rights to terminate employees for providing misleading information. Potential employees with felony records are placed at a grave disadvantage because of these hiring practices. This is yet another
way in which systemic racism contributes to the United States racially disparate labor market outcomes.

Don also alluded to how his sudden termination was deliberate and intended to prevent him from collecting the compensation he rightfully had coming. To support his claim, Don offered the following remarks when queried about why he felt he was swiftly laid off:

‘Cause like they were on a point scale. If you get so many points, you get a raise. Shit when I came in, if you get 9 points you get a raise. So, when I came in, I got 3 points off the rip... In order for you to get the points, the job got to call back to the human resource office. So, I’m guessing the human resources was like who is this guy? Who is this guy? So, I think they checked my background, all that stuff, and they fired me on the spot.

Although it is unknown how long Don worked at his job, the fact stands that he was laid off of his job before having an opportunity to fully prove his worth to his employer. However, as Don’s comments suggest, his employer may have been less interested about him proving his worth as an employee and more concerned about profiting from their exploitation of his fixed surplus labor. Since Don was prematurely terminated due to subtle institutionalized discrimination, the full value of his labor was of service to his capitalist employer and not him. Devin is another father who fail victim to labor market discrimination on the account of his incarceration history.

A 26-year-old father of two, Devin, has been “out of a job for about six months.” Due to him being previously “sentenced for three to four,” Devin has a sizeable employment gap on his resume, whereby, from his perspective, employers refuse to hire him. “People wasn’t calling me back or nothing. None of that sh*t.,” stated Devin. When asked if he feels his incarceration history has hindered him from securing a job, Devin offered the following remarks:

Oh yeah! Hell yeah. Regardless if I was qualified or not, you know, nobody wants a thief working for them, you know what I’m saying? Some people gave me a break, but you know, but when they did the background check, they were like, “Oh shit, it’s going to be a thief working here. We can’t have him here ‘cause that’s going to look bad on us.” So, that’s what it is. That sh*t gets to me a lot. You know? Trying to get people to see pass my past. That sh*t f*cks with me a lot.
While few and far between, there have also been bright spots where Devin managed to find work. However, from Devin’s perspective, keeping a job can be just as hard as securing one. Devin’s ensuing comments explicate the difficulties he has experienced staying wedded to the formal economy:

Keeping the job is the hard part. It’s just, you know, when you feel like you have been disrespected because with these low-level payments, the manager, they treat you like sh*t. Because, you know, their policy is we can replace you. You feel me? It’s always somebody else that wants this job. So, it’s only hard when you get into little situations where you feel like you are being disrespected. And these people treat you like you are below them as a man…

In Devin’s case, the labor market discrimination he faces is two-fold: (1) he encounters labor market discrimination due to his incarceration history; and (2) he is a victim of labor discrimination in the workplace due to his low status job position. In both instances, Devin’s financial stability stands on precarious grounds because of his tenuous attachment to the formal economy. On the one hand, the labor market discrimination Devin experiences due to his past involvement in the criminal justice system hinders him from gaining legitimate work, despite his persistent efforts to seek employment. On the other hand, once securing formal work, Devin is treated as exploitable labor by company managers because entry-level jobs that pay poverty wages are in high demand. Taken together, these distinct forms of labor market discrimination coalesce to ensure Devin remains unjustly impoverished, thereby undercutting his ability to provide for himself and his family.

Greg is another father who faced labor market discrimination within the workplace. Greg is the custodial parent of his sole child who feels as if “it’s harder being an African American male” in the workplace. “You see things differently once you get into the workforce. You actually see things are handed to people,” stated Greg when asked about his experiences in the workplace. The “people” Greg is referring to are his white male colleagues who he believes are given preferential treatment on the job. Greg’s following statements are illustrative of this point:
Some people walk into the door as a supervisor. I wanted to work for it but not necessarily how it was presented to me. I worked my way up to be a supervisor and then a Caucasian gentleman walked in the door, and they were like, “Train him. He’s going to be a supervisor with you.” I was like hmm alright, I’ll take that one. That was a difficult pill for me to swallow because I didn’t feel like he paid his dues… We’re roughly the same age but at the same time, they hired him, and I had to show him everything I know. That’s not how it should be, but you got to take it with a grain of salt… That’s another thing I had to learn, my temperament. You gotta know when you fed up and it’s time to go. You have to learn to not fly off the handle or punch a hole in the wall or break stuff ‘cause you’re angry. You got to learn how to take that energy and use it. It’s gonna flow through you, but you gotta find another outlet.

After poring over Greg’s impassioned words, I could not help but think about the following sentence written by Feagin (2014:183) regarding employment discrimination: “In addition, to such direct discrimination against workers of color, there are other screening mechanisms that involve well-institutionalized favoritism for many white employees.” Feagin’s incisive remarks perfectly sum up the workplace discrimination Greg experienced in this isolated incident. As an African American male, Greg feels that he would have never been afforded the type opportunity his white male colleague received. When confronted with what he interprets as blatant disrespect, Greg tends to become infuriated.

It is important to mention that Greg has a firm handle on his temper and does not lash out in an uncontrollable rage. However, regardless of whether or not Greg explodes in indignation, the fact remains that the anger and rage he feels due to workforce discrimination can lead internal anguish, emotional turmoil, and have a negative impact on his physical and mental health. These costs of racism have implications for Greg’s financial security. Should Greg decide to vacate his job due to this workplace discrimination, or worse, loses his job to the person he trains, Greg can find himself completing an unemployment application, thereby contributing to his economic precariousness and unjust impoverishment.

Earl is another father who has been negatively affected by labor market discrimination. A 27-year-old father of two, he is chronically jobless. However, Earl’s chronic jobless status has
nothing to do with him being shiftless or lazy, as he is actively on the job hunt. “I done did a lot of applications,” Earl remarks. What is prohibiting Earl from joining the labor market is not his lack of ambition. To the contrary, more sinister forces are at play. Coupled with his criminal history, Earl also firmly believes that his employment woes teeter on the axis of race, gender, and class-based discrimination. When asked why he believes he is unemployed, he mentioned the following: “probably because I don’t have no high school diploma or GED. Probably because I have been locked up and convicted of a felony.” When pushed to offer an alternative explanation for his hiring discrimination, Earl doubled down on his initial statement. In his mind, “what else can it be.” Julian’s story is similar to Earl’s, though not identical.

Julian is a “two-time convicted felon” with two biological children and one stepchild. Julian’s job recently laid him off work, which has turned his world topsy-turvy. After “lucking up” and finding the job he just lost, Julian knows he faces an uphill battle to find another one because of his incarceration history. When asked how things are going for him in terms of work, Julian offered the following reply:

This week is the last week of my unemployment. So, I’m trying to find a new job before unemployment runs out. I know that’s gonna be difficult with my aggravated assault and felonies on my record… I’m a two-time convicted felon. So, I got 2 or 3 felonies on my record and you know these people not trying to let me fill out an application, you know what I mean? You can tell them that’s it’s been expunged or whatever, but they don’t want to hear it if it’s on your record. They see felony this, felony that… I was wrongly convicted of some things that I didn’t do in my past…

In both cases, Earl and Julian vividly reflect on how their incarceration histories are potentially causing employers to overlook them for jobs. Again, despite these men knowing they will be confronted with the possibility of rejection on the job search, they are committed to putting their best foot forward to find legitimate work. However, to no avail, they are unable to shake the stigma of their past involvement in the criminal justice system, which causes them to continually struggle against the racism they encounter in the labor market. Without a formal sector job, these
fathers are unable to accumulate legitimate income, which contributes to their unjust impoverishment.

Alongside experiencing labor market discrimination because of their incarceration histories, several fathers also encountered appearance-based discrimination. Specifically, a handful of fathers mentioned that they were discriminated against because of their physical features. For example, Jalen, a 25-year-old father of four and high-school dropout, explained how negative perceptions about his physical appearance and race-, gender-, and felony-status contributes to his chronic joblessness:

I have an armed robbery. Like an armed robbery, that stop you from doing anything. I have an armed robbery and a kidnapping. So, if I did an application at McDonalds, they throwing it out! The first reason why McDonalds ain’t going to hire me is because I have tattoos on my face. The second reason is because I’m a convicted felon. Third reason is because I have an armed robbery on my record. And the fourth reason is because I have a kidnapping. They’ll think, “Oh he’ll rob me,” or “He’ll kidnap somebody at the job.” That be the first 2 things that come to they mind. So, they’ll be like: “Why would we give him the job? Look at him. He don’t wanna do nothing but be in the streets anyway.”

In another interview, Milton, a 31-year-old father of two, teetering on the verge of homelessness, also believes employers are unwilling to hire African American men such as himself. In his view, not only does his past involvement in the criminal justice system prevent him from getting a job, but stereotypical assumptions about his physical appearance come into play. After asking Milton why he feels he has been passed up for employment opportunities, he stated: “My hair. As you can see, my hair is a little frizzy. I usually keep my hair done. I used to think that sometimes they just don't want a Black person to be working in this type of place. Sometimes, I think that people be stereotypical.” After encouraging Milton to further unpack his comments, he provided these remarks to support his supposition:

Black people with hair. People with Dreads. They will look at him like: “This guy probably sells drugs. He probably robs for a living.” All of us are not like that, you know what I mean?
Both cases are illustrative of why employers potentially refused to hire the above-mentioned fathers. From Jalen’s perspective, his facial tattoos could have been a turnoff for employers. Additionally, Milton’s frizzy hair or dreadlocks might not sit well with a hiring manager looking to fill a vacant employment slot. At any rate, the idea that these fathers felt that their styles of physical presentation may hinder them from securing formal sector employment is quite revealing. Even more telling is how fathers made connections between aspects of their physical appearance (e.g., facial tattoos and dreadlocks) and stereotypical racial images of Black men as violent criminals and drug merchants, suggesting that such an image would automatically enter the minds of hiring managers. The narratives of both fathers are highly suggestive of the fact that appearance-based discrimination is another component of labor market discrimination that is often overlooked and under-examined in social science empirical scholarship.

Whether the labor market discrimination the fathers faced was due to their incarceration history, occurred within the workplace, or was a result of their physical appearance, the fact remains that their material well-being was placed in jeopardy. Subtle labor market discrimination is a contemporary way in which systemic racism occurs in today’s society. Beyond the immediate consequences associated with becoming unjustly impoverished as a result of falling prey to systemic racism, there are many additional costs and burdens that must be considered. The following section discusses these costs and burdens in greater detail.

5.1 The Costs and Burdens of Racism: Crushed Dreams

One of the many consequences of systemic racism is that an individual may be unable fulfill their personal desires because the weight of race-, class-, and gender-based oppression is weighing them down. When this occurs, the aspirational dreams of the individual being trampled by the iron feet of systemic oppression are crushed and swept aside. As a result, it becomes much more difficult for such individuals to provide their children and families with the material support
necessary to offer them a brighter future. It can even become a challenge for the victims of systemic racism and institutionalized inequality to imagine a positive future for those individuals who depend on them. This was the case for nearly all of the interviewed fathers, especially as it pertains to their occupational dreams. The following narrative brings this point into sharp focus.

Since President Nixon took office, the U.S. labor market has gradually shifted toward an unevenly divided dual-economy, whereby 20 percent of U.S. earners are attached to the FTE sector (Finance, Technology, and Electronics) and the remaining 80 percent are wedded to the low-wage sector (Temin 2017). Whereas occupations in the FTE sector offer greater job stability and economic mobility, the low-wage sector does “not always provide the requisite hours, wages, or security that are needed for a sure pathway out of poverty” (Varner, Mattingly, and Grusky 2017:6). African Americans are disproportionately shuffled into the low-wage sector (Temin 2017). As it relates to African-American men, arguments exist that suggest they are subjected to an occupational crowding of sorts, whereby they are systematically herded into lower-paying jobs (Hamilton et al. 2011). Empirical findings from this study suggest that a similar pattern may be unfolding among interviewed fathers.

Nearly 90 percent of the interviewed fathers worked within the low-wage economy at some point in their adult life. While grateful for the opportunity to punch the clock, in-depth interviews highlighted the economic precariousness associated with low-wage employment. Qualitative interviews revealed that they were routinely employed as food service, construction, maintenance, warehouse, or landscaping professionals, with food service and construction equally accounting for nearly 50 percent of the jobs these men held in their lifetime. These jobs typically spelled poverty-wage, intermittent work, and, on certain occasions, unpredictably long workdays. On the whole, interviewed fathers often struggled to secure the types of jobs that would allow them to financially support themselves, let alone their children and families.
Let us take for example Kendrick, a 53-year-old father. Kendrick has fathered 6 children with two different women, to whom he was married at different points in his life. Following a contentious divorce proceeding with his second wife, however, Kendrick managed to gain full custody of his “second set” of kids, as his ex-wife suffered from substance addiction. Kendrick now assumes all financial responsibilities for his family. Consequently, he spends much of his time at work, where he is appreciative of the fact that his boss gives him “a little leeway” since he knows he is “a single-father.”

However, despite Kendrick’s indebtedness to his supervisor, he holds no allegiance to the company itself. Kenrick wishes he “had more of an opportunity to do things that can be more profitable” for his family. According to Kendrick:

I spend too much time at work... I work. I have a job. I work for someone, for a company. But every day I go to work, I’m thinking about how I’m gonna get out of this trap. I’m a big thinker, you know? I’ve had a lot of ideas. I’ve had some business ventures down in Florida. Very profitable. So, I know I got it in me. My first wife, that’s all we did. I worked a job probably the first 3 years and after that, we made our own money. It’s a million and one ways to make money, not just one. You just got to be a certain type of individual, everybody not cut like that. Everybody don’t care. They’ll go punch a clock for the rest of their life and don’t care. I don’t think like that, you know? This is something I have to do now but, in the future, this ain’t me!

Devin, profiled earlier, has a similar story to share:

Right now, I’m working at Steak n’ Shake. Personally, I feel like it’s a just a stop along the trip. ‘Cause personally, I want wealth. So, I got experience, but I have to go to school and that’s my biggest thing. You know, the whole going-back-to-school process. And, can I can’t do that with the two kids, you know? And, with me working so much? Like, sh*t, I might work 6 or 7 days out of the week. So, really… the time I’m here (home), sh*t, I’m sleeping! ‘Cause I work that much, so sh*t. You know, most people average 40 hours a week I might bust 70 - 80 hours in a week and that’s just f*cking Steak n’ Shake. They got me working like that. So, working… I want to… but I don’t want to keep working there forever.

Kendrick and Devin’s narratives both illuminate their noble occupational dreams. Instead of working for minimum wage for the remainder of their life, they would rather their vocational abilities be invested in something that yields a higher financial return. In terms of work, they are
after something far more lucrative and far less time consuming. Yet, the pressures of daily life prevent them from realizing their personal ambitions. The positive visions they have for their futures recede to the backdrop whenever they are reminded of their daily responsibilities as parents. Indeed, these fathers are doing the sensible thing by prioritizing the immediate needs of their children. However, if these fathers are not given an opportunity to realize their occupational dreams, their children could unwittingly inherit similar life circumstances, barring an intervention of some sort.

According to research conducted by Hamilton, Austin, and Darity (2011) a structural remedy is precisely what is need to improve the labor market outcomes of Black men, especially those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. As their research suggests, on average, Black men are underrepresented in high-wage jobs and underrepresented in low-wage jobs, even after accounting for their level of education (Hamilton et al. 2011). Even after accounting for their educational attainment, hard skills, soft skills, and occupational interests, Black men still find themselves crowded into low-wage jobs (Hamilton et al. 2011). As a result of Black men being herded into low-wage, less-desirable jobs, their earnings were 71 percent less than that of White men. After exhausting all potential explanations for the occupational crowding they observe, Hamilton, Austin, and Darity (2011:9) were left to conclude that “labor market discrimination” was “the key explanation for a racially segregated labor market that systematically crowds Black men into low-paying, less-desirable jobs and out of high-paying, more-desirable jobs.”

Therefore, for fathers like Kendrick and Devin, the stigma attached to their color is likely undermining their chances of climbing the occupational career ladder. Until thoughtful efforts are taken to root out labor market discrimination, Black men like Kendrick and Devin will continue to earn less than money than White men. The effects of this occupational crowding will continue to thwart the upward mobility of Black families and communities.
Don is another father who is forced to place his aspirational pursuits on the backburner. For example, Don would like to further his education, especially given his difficulties finding work due to his incarceration history. However, he knows that going back to school will interfere with his immediate responsibilities as a parent. As Don put it:

Like, I always have schools calling me like, “Do you want to further your education?” Stuff like that. Right now, education, ain’t gone pay no bills like that. Like, you know, I wouldn’t mind going back to school. Don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t mind going back to school but, at the same time, I got to be financially straight before I do that. Like, I would have to be financially straight so that I would have time to do that. Right now, I don’t have time to do that ‘cause, right now, my main focus is me going to work, coming home and taking care of my kids. Like, that’s all I think ‘bout

Don, like Kendrick and Devin, has personal aspirations that revolve around him furthering his education. As his statement makes clear, returning to school is an individual dream of his, one that will ideally allow him to better support his family and maintain stable job. However, because he is often in dire financial straits because he is sporadically unemployed, he cannot risk leaving any money on the table for his children.

Earl, who has “been convicted for a felony,” also plans to go “back to school.” “I am supposed to be starting the GED program,” Earl remarked during our interview. When asked what school he plans to attend, Earl replied: “Atlanta Tech. That is my main focus. I am trying to get an education and after that, then see where it goes from there. Hopefully, I can get a good job”

Although Earl has never held a job in his life, largely due to his past involvement in the criminal justice system, he has a clear idea of what his ideal job entails. After being asked to offer his definition of a “good job,” Earl responded with the following:

I can work all week except the weekends. Something that I like doing. Something using my hands. I like to use my hands a lot, so that will be good. And of course, the pay. I hope the pay is well.
As Earl’s excerpts conveys, he surely values the importance of education and feel that it will help them achieve some level of individual prosperity. For Earl, furthering his education is a conduit to securing his first every job.

Although Don and Earl do not explicitly mention this in their narratives, it is worth noting that their ex-felon status will likely complicate their pursuit of higher education. Federal law prohibits anyone convicted of a felony or misdemeanor, especially a drug-related offense, from receiving financial aid. Because Black men like Don and Earl are disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system (Alexander 2012), punitive post-incarceration policies such as denying ex-felons with financial aid leaves them with fewer opportunities to transcend their past misdeeds so they can productively contribute to mainstream American society. If men with incarceration histories are continually penalized by restrictive and punitive criminal justice policies, the likelihood of them enhancing their educational and occupational skills are further placed in jeopardy and contribute to their unjust impoverishment.

Mike, a 28-year-old nonresident father of three, is another father who resents himself for his current employment situation. Mike’s employment status is far from where he envisioned it would be at this particular juncture in his life. After asking Mike how things are going for him in terms of his current employment situation, Mike told me the following:

Well, my current employer… I just started with them like a week before last. I had lost a job…I was making $7.25/hr. I was still struggling…have a car though, and I have 2 kids I have to take care of. And I got to help my kids’ mom like… it was hard, it was so hard. It was hard working with that job. I was struggling there. It would be times when my bank account was overdrawn… And then, my check come in, and it’s gone. So, then I had to wait a whole another 2 weeks to get the check. And like, it just wasn’t enough money for me then. And like now, I make $9.75/hr., and it’s still not enough. But it’s more money than what I was making before what I had to do for right now…because I can pay my car with that and still have $300 or $400 dollars left from my check… so… yeah, it’s much easier now. I’m with this job to take care of my kids and help out and do more stuff. But I don’t want to have no job forever… I want a career.
Mike’s “I don’t want to have no job forever… I want a career” statement at the end of his discourse is quite revealing. Mike firmly understands that his current employment situation does not provide the requisite financial security typically seen with folks who have more financially productive careers. While Mike’s current employment situation is a notch above what he is accustomed to, it is still ripe with inadequate wages and brings unwanted stress into his life.

Further, while Mike’s financial situation has somewhat improved, he is still far from being finically stable, which he feels will only come once he has a career. For Mike, a career is more than a series of jobs but rather one lone job that offers him a living wage salary and a benefit package that will support him and his children. Mike lacks these at his current place of employment and maybe Mike is starting to question if he will ever have a career, especially given his difficulties simply securing a salary. In conjunction to systemic racism theory, Mike’s economic precariousness contributes to his unjust impoverishment and undermines his psychological and material well-being.

Zion is another father who has yet to realize his occupational dreams. Zion’s employment situation is far from ideal, but “things are going okay” from his perspective. At the time of the interview, he worked at Rainbow Café. Zion gave the following response when asked if keeping a job can be challenging for him:

Definitely keeping a job is challenging, especially when you are waking up every day like, “Do I really want to do this?” You shouldn’t have to do that. If you don’t like what you are doing on a daily basis, like me, then that is definitely a problem. I always look at it like I need to provide for my kids. I need this money coming in… Keeping a job has not been that hard for me. I will work at the craziest job, as long as they are paying okay... I would say if I didn’t have any kids, it would probably be hard for me to keep a job because I wouldn’t take any job. If I didn’t feel the job or it wasn’t benefitting me then I wouldn’t take the job. But knowing I got kids and got people depending on me, it’s pretty easy for me. I know I got to keep it. I got people depending on me.

In this excerpt, Zion repeatedly alludes to the fact that his job is just a placeholder for him right now and that he would like something better. In another statement, when reflecting on Rainbow
Café, Zion states, “It’s not my career or what I want to do for the rest of my life.” This statement suggest that Zion has occupational dreams that he has yet to realize in his life.

Milton, a nonresident father with two children, has also seen his occupational dreams vanish before his very eyes. After being convicted for a misdemeanor charge for possession of “less than an ounce” of marijuana, Milton was placed on one-year probation, which was the precipitating factor that led to him losing his job because he was unable to pay his probation fines. Milton’s ensuing statements reveal exactly what transpired.

I was taking care of my kids. I had a job. I was working at Pepsi, and I was working a Frogers warehouse. I had a violation of probation. I wasn't paying my fines, and I was taking care of my kids. I know I had to pay probation, but sometimes my fines were low, and I have my kids and they needed something. So, I would just pay for my kids’ clothes and shoes. You know, stuff that they need because they are growing, and they are getting bigger. They feet getting bigger. They pants are getting bigger, and my daughter needs pampers. I say, you know what, I'm going to go ahead and pay this. And, to make a long story short, I got locked up because I didn’t have the money to pay my fines. So, I had got locked up for two months.

Milton’s story is a classic example of the callous ways the criminal justice system is indifferent to the plight and circumstances of the poor and disenfranchised. Not only did Milton lose his freedom for prioritizing the needs of his children, but he also lost access to his children and his job for his inability to make payments for both justice fines and the needs of his children.

This is also an example of how non-detainment in the justice system (such as probation) can spiral into detention (incarceration) when minor infractions such as failure to pay fines come to bear, resulting in further impoverishing those impacted. The resulting action, detention, seems to contradict the basis for initially offering non-detainment. Thus, the burden that the formerly incarcerated individual must uphold during probation is fraught with potential flashpoints that could ultimately result in harsher punishment than was initially levied. This is yet another way in which African American fathers become unjustly impoverished and psychologically wounded, both of which are the effects of systemic racism.
5.2 The Costs and Burdens of Racism: Provider Role Strain

The costs and burdens of racism are multi-faceted. The costs and burdens of racism are also deeply psychological. At face value, these specific consequences of systemic racism may appear to be triggered by something more than money. However, given the core objective of systemic racism is to ensure white economic domination by perpetuating the unjust impoverishment of Black Americans, there is always a financial component at play due to capitalist exploitation. Therefore, given the unjust impoverishment many of the interviewed fathers experienced throughout their adult life, it is no surprise that many of them were unable to be good economic providers for their families and children, which generally is understood in the United States to be the primary cultural expectation (among other expectations) for fathers (LaRossa 1997). Because of some interviewed fathers’ inability to assume such responsibilities, a significant number of them experienced provider role strain. The provider role strain that fathers experienced had a broad psychological impact on them, as it challenged their self-confidence and personal identity (Bowman and Forman 1997).

For example, Jarvis, an ex-offender father, made the following statement when asked what’s the toughest part of being a father:

I wish I had money to make sure they [children] have everything, but you know we have to pay bills. So, that is why I am working on getting a second job, to get the things they need. For example, the shoes he needs for when he goes back to school. Clothes, stuff like that. So, my main focus right now is trying to get a better job, so my boys can have what they need for school in the fall.

Another case in point is Billy, a 33-year-old father who is constantly at odds with the mother of his first child, also has qualms about how he is going to “take care” of his children. As someone who has always “had trouble getting jobs,” Billy felt: “...[T]he tough part about being with your children is not always being able to provide. So, that’s my hard thing about being a
father, not being able to provide…” Later in the interview I also asked Billy, what is one of the biggest challenges he has faced. He offered the following response:

The big challenge is being able to pay bills every month. That’s it. That’s the only challenge. ‘Cause I have to take care of my children, and I do the best I can to take care of them, and show them that this is what a man is supposed to do. A man is not supposed to around their kids and not take care of them. A man is supposed to help take care of the family. I try to show my girls that… This is what a man is supposed to do in a household. That’s what I try to teach my little girls. You don’t date just any man…

Billy’s excerpt reinforces two points: (1) how difficult it is for him to instrumentally support his children; and (2) the saliency of hegemonic masculinity within a capitalist system that ordinarily and economically privileges White men. Billy makes it emphatically clear that he has to take care of his children, especially his girls, and show them everything a man is “supposed” to be. After reading into Billy’s words, it appears that his idealized version of manhood is inextricably linked to authoritative rule and financial strength. Rodger is another father who mentioned how his lack of personal finances hindered him from providing for his children in meaningful ways. Moreover, Rodger hypothesizes about how financial insecurity creates a whirlwind of chaos for families who would benefit from some measure of economic stability.

Well, as far as my children, the ice cream man coming down the street in the summertime. A little piece of change. It doesn’t cost nothing but a little piece of change to buy ice cream. Not having no money makes me look bad in front of my children. It makes it look bad because they want it [ice-cream], and I don’t have the money to buy it… Far as the women go, not having enough money to pay bills can be an issue... Not having no job will cause major problems in the home. Love can be around in the home, but when it comes to money, money is on a whole different level. Money has ended a whole lot of relationships that I’ve seen because it wasn’t enough to go around. Not having enough money has broken up families.

For Rodger, his economic impoverishment has caused him internal shame whenever he is unable to provide for his children. Rodger’s dwindling self-confidence is apparent when he says, “Not having no money makes me look bad in front of my children.” Devin is another father who
shares Rodger’s personal humiliation when he is unable to materially provide for his children.

Devin’s following statement makes this point clear:

I know when I didn’t have a job, I was always at the house, so, and you feel like you need the space. And that’s what it was. That was really kicking my a**. I was always around them not doing sh*t. Nothing. Nothing at all. That’s what it was. The kids were always there, waking up and going to school, and I was just sitting on the couch.

Devin, who is also a victim of labor market discrimination, has experienced long bouts of unemployment, which has contributed to his unjust impoverishment. Devin is now feeling the negative psychological effects of this unjust impoverishment, which is creating inner turmoil for him.

Detailing a time when money was scare, Calvin, shared a story about how his resolve helped to stave off a brief stint of material deprivation:

I ain’t never had help from the government, so it has been hard with me. Like, my lights been off before with the kids. I done had my lights off with the kids when I was first started the program [Dad2K]. I wasn’t going to the studio. I wasn’t recording nobody. Our lights wasn’t on. They got cut off. So, it got hard to the point where, okay, now I gotta use my plan B…. Go buy a cooler. Go get some ice. We need a cooler. Put the food in the refrigerator in the cooler. “Boy you gotta come up with $500 to get the lights to come” is what I’m telling myself. These kids hungry. I’d go get some charcoal. We finna eat on the grill. You don’t have to put everybody in your business. I had to handle my business. Three days later, my lights were back on. So, you gotta know what to do in certain situations.

Mike is another father who felt that if he had a “job, a good job,” he would be more financially “stable” and better equipped to support his children. When asked to expound on what “stable” looked like for him, Mike offered the following response:

Like, having your own place, having money in a bank account, being able to just go and buy your kids whatever they want whenever they need it. ‘Cause right now, I’m in a hole, I’m diggin myself out of this hole. Like, I can’t buy nothing! Can’t buy nothing but food and buy them clothes and stuff. But whenever I feel like I want to buy them the best, I can’t do it, because I don’t have no money saved up. Because all the money I had saved up, I spent it. It’s hard though. It’s killing me. All of that stuff. I was just struggling… being stable is good. Being stable is really good. And I wish I was stable for my family.
Mike’s sentiments were shared by two other fathers when asked “what is the toughest part of being a father.” As Zion put it, “I’m definitely going to say money. That’s all I can say right now; just being more financially stable to do more for my kids.” Another father, Earl, stated that he yearns to “help out financially with stuff like pampers and shoes.” However, it is quite difficult for Earl to accomplish these noble goals. “Being that I am unemployed, I can’t do that sometimes,” Earl remarks.

Circling back to Zion, when he was asked how his job (or lack of a job) affected his involvement with his family, he stated the following:

Definitely have a big problem if you don’t have a job, especially with your kids… They mommas always asking for something and you can’t provide it and um, you know, it’s not the right thing. Even though you are spending time with your kids, you always want to be able to provide for them. Not having a job is definitely hard on that child’s mother too because she has to do everything by herself…

Marty was asked the same question and gave the following reply:

It’s caused me not to have enough money to purchase the things that I need to sometimes… Like, she [child’s mother] told me that he needed some pampers, and I didn’t get paid that day, or I don’t have any cash to get pampers or whatever else he may need. So, that caused a little of a problem between us by me not having a job… that causes problems between me and the mommas.

Both Zion and Marty’s comments reflect another cost and burden of racism. Outside of these fathers being unable to instrumentally support their children, the mothers of their children are forced to shoulder more of the financial burden of caring for their children. Although not explicitly stated by interviewed fathers, the psychological health of these mothers also diminishes due to provider role strain (Mendenhall, Bowman, and Zhang 2013).

Joseph and Kendrick, in their own way, discuss the effects of provider role strain. Starting with Joseph, when asked what the toughest part is of being a father, he responded as such:

When I can’t see my babies. When I can’t get to them. When they need them and I’m not able to provide the way I want to. When I’m not able to give them the thangs that I want for them in life that I know they deserve. That’s the toughest thing in the world, not being able to provide for them.
When asked to give a couple of examples of the types of things he would like to provide for them, Joseph stated the following:

Jordan’s, motorcycles, the big remote-control trucks, all the big thangs. I’m not talking about food, that’s basic. You got brand new Jordan’s and Xboxes and all that, that’s what children want. They love video games; you know what I mean?

Kendrick, who was growing impatient when asked what the most difficult part is of being a father, had this to say:

I already answered that. It’s that money. You know how when you got money, it’s a different life. It’s a different life. I’ve been involved with people, you know? I’ve had money, people I’m involved with had money, it’s a whole different life, you know? I don’t know—it’s a whole different life—I don’t know who chooses to live like this. Nobody chooses to live like this. If I had a choice, I wouldn’t want to live like this, but I’m just trying to be a better role model for my children, but I don’t have to live like this, but I have to show the kids. You got to go to work, work hard for what you want and not only am I saying it, I’m showing them.

In both cases, Joseph and Kendrick are describing how their self-confidence is slowly fading because of their inability to provide adequate material support for their children. Granted, Joseph confesses that he is able to take care of the “basic” stuff like making sure his children have food to eat, which is surely important. However, because he is unable to purchase them the things “they love” and the things “children want,” he has developed unfavorable views of his worth as a parent. The same can be said about Kendrick, who wishes he did not have to subject his children to such a financially miserable lifestyle. In several of Kendrick’s remarks, he directly and indirectly speaks to not having agency over his own life, which surely eats away at his self-confidence as a man and father. For example, this point is made abundantly clear when Kendrick states, “If I had a choice, I wouldn’t want to live like this.”

5.3 The Costs and Burdens of Racism: Interconnected Life Struggles

In terms of the costs and burdens of racism, there is an overlapping and interrelated component that has yet to be discussed. For many interviewed, systemic racism wreaked havoc in
their lives on multiple fronts. The life-course challenges these men confronted were quite daunting, as they significantly contributed to their employment woes, economic insecurity, child support issues, and inability to obtain adequate housing. Furthermore, the experiences of incarceration, unemployment and chronic joblessness, labor market discrimination, and inconsistent work at poverty wages took often prevented many of the interviewed fathers from being able to sufficiently investment in the material wellbeing of their children. In all, these costs and burdens of systemic racism contributed to the interconnected life struggles of interviewed fathers.

Let us briefly explore the issue of child support and child support enforcement in the context of systemic racism. Several interviewed fathers found themselves affected by the punitive nature of the child support system. For these fathers, they legitimately feared that they will be arrested, or rearrested, for failing to pay their open child support orders, which were often set at amounts that they could not afford. Whenever these men missed a child support payment, the punitive nature of child support enforcement kicked, which signaled disaster for fathers. Julian’s experience is illustrative of this point.

Julian currently has $10,000 in child support debt and recently had his driver’s license suspended for “failure to appear in court for a child support hearing.” Apparently, Julian was never made aware that he had a child support court hearing. Nevertheless, after asking Julian how he feels about having his driver’s license suspended, he stated the following:

Pissed off for one! It’s a lot of jobs that you got to have your license to get. It’s a CDL training program that’s getting ready to start, and I wanted to participate in it. It was free of charge. Everything was free, but if you don’t have your license, you can’t participate. They don’t want to deal with you. It’s a lot of job out here hiring for me to do some driving. I could drive for Uber or drive Lyft. But I can’t because I don’t have a license, and I don’t have a license because I owe child support money. That sound crazy… I’m trying to go to work to get caught up with child support… You gonna lock me up for not paying child support, you gonna take my license? Okay, I mean the child still ain’t getting nothing from me now. The little bit I was trying to give, nobody sees that. It just makes no sense. It’s the same for the job search. You ain’t got no license, they ain’t gonna deal with you. I be pissed off
really. For real! You know what I mean? I’m trying to get caught up with the payments now.

Julian’s impassioned words further illuminate that the costs and burdens of systemic racism take many forms. Not only does Julian’s experience with the child support system have material costs, whenever Julian says he is “pissed off” as a result of the punitive tactics of child support enforcement, he is also speaking to the psychological costs of systemic racism. The punitive costs of child support debt appear to be creating additional harm in Julian’s life. Because Julian’s license has been revoked, he is unable to secure legitimate employment so that he can pay his unpaid child support debt. Without work, the likelihood falling further behind in child support debt becomes more of a reality. This will also increase the chances that child support enforcement will deploy additional punitive tactics to collect child support from Julian, such as having him arrested.

Jarvis is another father who knows about the strong hand of child support enforcement all too well. According to Jarvis:

Child support is not to be f***ed with! Shit gets real when you don’t pay that money. Too many people in jail because of Child support. A lot of people take that s**t as a joke until they (child support enforcement) come knocking on the door.

Child support enforcement definitely came knocking on Billy’s door.

Of all the stories told by fathers with open child support orders, none was as nerve-racking than Billy’s. When given the opportunity to work, which was infrequent due to persistently experiencing labor market discrimination, Billy spent most of his days on-call as a landscaper, where he was “paid under the table.” As a result, Billy rarely had money to adequately support his children. From Billy’s viewpoint, his inability to financially contribute to the well-being of his children adds to his tumultuous relationship with the mother of his youngest daughter. “She just hates me,” he states. Below is a recap of a story Billy shared during our one-on-one interview concerning child support:
I didn’t even know I had a child support warrant on me. So, I ended up going back to jail for child support… for child abandonment. I didn’t even know I got a warrant for that…. As the years go by, I’m still going to jail for child support cause I ain’t getting any warrants. So, I found out that she’s [child’s mother] sending the warrant to a bogus address, to her friend’s address, like I stay there...

Due to Billy’s child support misfortunes, he now owes the office of child support a significant amount of money. Therefore, Billy has made it more of a priority to get a job. However, things have not been going as planned for Billy in this department. Billy’s remarks are very telling of the punitive and long-reaching effects of child support debt:

So, as I get older, I go to the airport trying to get a job to help me out with my daughter. So, what really discouraged me from working, the lady told me I couldn’t work ‘cause I owe child support. I cried in front of the lady. You’re the only person I’ve ever told this story to in my life, other than my momma and my girl. I cried in front of the lady. I said, ‘why would you say I can’t work if I’m coming here to help… I’m on child support, so why can’t I work to pay my child support? That’s the reason I’m coming here looking for a job.’ She was like, ‘you can’t owe something and work for the airport.’ So, since then, I ain’t really been looking for a job.

Julian, Jarvis, and Billy narratives indicate that instead of helping families to thrive, punitive child support policies are actually having the opposite effect. Due to a vortex of laws, policies, and institutional practices, low-income Black fathers become unjustly impoverished by child support sanctions in two ways: (1) they become unjustly impoverished whenever they are unable to manage their open child support orders or pay their arrears; and (2) they plunge into further impoverishment whenever should they be imprisoned for their inability to pay their child support orders, which leads to other material costs for incarcerated fathers. Taken together, these two mutually reinforcing mechanisms operate in a vicious cycle and undermine the self-sufficiency of fathers and their families.

In the area of incarceration, there were also additional costs and burdens this area that went beyond having an effect on the labor market outcomes of interviewed fathers, as discussed in earlier sections of this chapter. Incarceration also facilitated the physical separation of parents and
children, often for significant periods of time. Calvin is one such father who experienced such an event and spoke to it in painful detail during the interview. While reflecting on how his prison stint negatively affected his relationship with his daughter, Calvin said this:

She’s the one that was born while I was in jail. She was the one that was 3 when I got out of jail. She was 3 years old when I got out of jail. I never got to touch her. I saw her in pictures and all that, but I couldn’t even see her in visitation

When asked how being in prison made him feel about himself as a father, Calvin went on to add the following:

It made me feel bad. It made me feel really bad. ‘Cause of me and my stupid decision and me not handling my business, it just to where I couldn’t come in and see my baby. But I’m on the phone in jail, on the phone for a long, long time. She had the baby at 5:33 September 24, 2006. I remember the date and time. Boy, I ain’t gone never forget the date and the time. It was 5:33 am. It was right before Countdown, and I probably got caught on the cellphone. She had the baby, and I didn’t even get to see the baby. I didn’t even get to sign her birth certificate…

In another instance, Jalen, was also unable to be there for his child like he wanted to due to serving a stint in prison. See the below quote for illustrative purposes:

So, make a long story short, she had my baby on Mother’s Day. And I get locked up 4 days later. She had my baby May 12, 2013. I got locked up May 16, 2013. Did a whole two years. My baby 2. My baby finna be 3 next year. Yeah, d**n man, I was supposed to be out here making sure my baby taken care of, but I caught my case trying to provide for my family

According to Jalen, in the two years he was unable to be in his baby’s life, regrets that he was unable to provide for her. While Jalen is now a free man, he still has difficulties legitimately caring for his daughter because employers refuse to hire him on the account of his incarceration history. This is why he has “never had a job.” This is unfortunate because Jalen eagerly awaits the day when he can “see how it feels working a 9-5.” As Jalen puts it, “I ain’t never had no job, but I wanna see how it feel to have one.”

In the context of systemic racism, Calvin and Jalen’s remarks highlight how mass incarceration, which is a contemporary form of racial oppression, breaks up families in ways
similar to the institution of slavery. As in the days of slavery, Calvin and Jalen’s words reflect the
degree to which the children of Black fathers are unable to bond emotionally with their children
and how the children of incarcerated fathers are able to provide material support for their children
while they are imprisoned.

Furthermore, incarceration affected the residential stability of some interviewed fathers.
Due to their involvement with the criminal justice system, several fathers feel that they have been
the victims of legal discrimination in the housing market. Kendrick surely feels this way, which
was evident when I asked him if his current place of residence was adequate for him and his
children:

It’s a good place for now. It’s a good place for now. All this is a steppingstone for
us, man, because when we first came here, you know, we were living with
somebody, then they wanted us to leave. So, I went to a hotel, and I probably stayed
in a hotel for 6, 8 months, you know, with my children. Not really having a real
solid job, no car, very limited cash. I worked hard and when an opportunity came to
get out of the hotel into a house, I took it. This is just a steppingstone. Is this the
house I would like to live in? No. I mean is it adequate for me and the children?
Yes. Is it safe for me and the children? Yes, but it’s just a steppingstone. It was hard
for me to get into a place I really wanted to get into because my background. You
know, I got some things on my criminal record that are 5, 6 years old… That’s a
chapter in my life that’s gone, but they still hold it against me.

Calvin similarly feels that his incarceration history has not only affected his ability to
secure housing, it has hindered him in other ways as well:

…If you a convicted felon, you ain’t finna get a job out there. You probably ain’t
gone get you no apartment. Like you a felon, you can’t even get a car. You got to
have a good credit score to get a job. That don’t make no sense.

Fathers like Julian and Milton have also found it difficult to secure housing for themselves
and their families due to their financial instability, which was largely triggered by their
incarceration history. As Julian states:

Finding a new job. This job right here just ended. This week is my last week there.
So, I’m trying to find a new job before my unemployment runs out. I know that’s
gonna be difficult with my aggravated assault and felonies on my record. That’s
why I’m trying to get into this program over at Hiring Now. They got a six-week
program. You get in there they put you straight to work. I’m trying to get into that. That’s my only challenge, finding a place for us to live on our own because this is my brother-in-law home. I want to get my family back into our own spot, and, like I said, I want to find work and catch up on this child support ‘cause they’ll lock you up. I ain’t got 10 grand just to give out. So, I’m trying my best just to send them something ‘cause that’s serious. That’s all my challenges right now.

Milton adds:

I’m homeless ‘cause I don’t have my own. I don’t have my own apartment or my own house or whatever. So, that’s why I moved here with my mother and my sister… How I’m living now, I’m thankful and whatever. I’m thankful ‘cause I know there’s somebody out there going through the something but maybe worst. I’m thankful for that, even though I’m working on getting my own apartment. It should be in like 3 more months. I’m saving up. ‘Cause when I get my first apartment, I want to make sure that I have a nice apartment. I had lost an apartment. Me and the mother of my kids lost an apartment ‘cause we had financial issues in our relationship.

Although Milton does not explicitly mention how his lack of employment and criminal past has contributed to his housing instability, given he has mentioned how those things have impacted him in the past, it is reasonable to assume that they play a factor in him being temporarily homeless.

5.4 Conclusion Section

In closing, Chapter 5 highlighted the degree to which contemporary forms of racial oppression produced serious deprivations in the lives of interviewed fathers. Unjust impoverishment and the costs and burdens of racism, which are two of the four key aspects of systemic racism, were analytically applied to the narratives of interviewed fathers. Based on the narratives of interviewed fathers, it was clear to see how systemic racism contributed to their labor market discrimination and occupational crowding in the low-wage jobs. Further, the extraordinary costs and burdens of systemic racism undermined the self-sufficiency of interviewed fathers and jeopardized their families as well.

Indeed, modern-day forms of systemic racism perpetuate patterns of anti-black oppression. While the racial discrimination African Americans encounter today is far more subtle than before,
the fact still remains that the effects are strikingly similar. As was the case during the days of slavery and legal segregation, present-day forms of racial oppression deny African-American fathers access to the types economic resources that allow for upward mobility. Without the desired economic stability, the lives of African-American fathers can downwardly spiral. If this occurs, the extraordinary costs and burdens of systemic racism can impact their lives in a cataclysmic fashion. The effects of systemic racism can appear in the form of interconnected life challenges that range from financial insecurity to unstable housing. Additionally, as a consequence of systemic racism, African-American fathers may be unable to actualize their life aspirations, or materially support the personal ambitions of their children, because of the routine discrimination they confront due to their race, class, and gender status.

There is an intergenerational component associated with the resource denial African-American fathers experience as well. Because African-American men routinely encounter discrimination in the areas of employment, education, and business, they are afforded fewer opportunities to amass income and wealth. The material benefits typically accrued by White-American men, as a result of them being the chief beneficiaries of systemic racism, are wholly unattainable by African-American men. Due to having less access to these various opportunity structures, African-American men are less capable of obtaining the types of economic resources (e.g., intergenerational resource transfers such as home equity and family savings) and social resources (e.g., quality education; job training and experience) that can be transmitted across generations. Therefore, systemic racism not only entails patterns of unjust impoverishment for African-American fathers, it also ensures that racial inequality will be socially reproduced and intergenerationally transferred to their children.
6 “I HAD TO GET MY MIND SET TO DO THE RIGHT THING” - CHALLENGING CONTROLLING IMAGES THROUGH ACTS OF RESISTANCE

Distorted portrayals of Black men and Black fathers have long inundated Western popular culture (Collins 2004:149–80). For Black men, there has been a historical tendency to depict them as maniacal individuals who are unable to abandon their alleged criminal proclivities (Brown 2014; Du Bois 1899:235–68). Similarly, starting with the controversial report penned by former Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965), Black fathers have been vilified within mass media and criticized by the general public for eschewing their parental responsibilities (Moyers 1986). Notwithstanding empirical evidence challenging such claims (Jones and Mosher 2013), news and opinion media continue to disseminate misinformation about Black-male criminality and irresponsible Black fathers.

Misleading media depictions that suggest Black men are naturally prone to criminal behavior and that Black fathers are unwilling to support their children reinforce these gender-specific controlling images. Misconceptions about Black men as innate criminals and “deadbeat” fathers is fueled by racist and gendered ideologies asserting that Blacks, in general, are culturally inferior, unintelligent, and unreflective (Feagin 2006:85–122; Smiley and Fakunle 2016), thereby explaining their ostensibly intuitive desire to behave erratically and act irresponsibly. Yet, as my empirical findings suggest, this line of thinking is inaccurate.

Contrary to mainstream media depictions of Black fathers, the narratives of fathers featured in this study challenge the negative imagery of Black men as innately criminal and irresponsible fathers. Therefore, in this chapter, I highlight how interviewed fathers challenged the powerful controlling images of the “violent criminal” and “deadbeat” father by engaging in acts of mental, spiritual, and physical resistance (Feagin 2006:60–65). Specifically, interviewed fathers challenged
the “violent criminal” and “deadbeat” father controlling image whenever their paternal thoughts and/or actions had a positive connotation associated with them.

Bearing this in mind, the first section of this chapter underscores how fatherhood served as a catalyst for many of the interviewed fathers to withdraw from “street life.” The second section of this chapter emphasizes the multiple efforts interviewed fathers made to connect with their kids they were barred from seeing due to conflicts with the child’s mother. This section also highlights the emotional turmoil many fathers felt as a result of being denied access to their children. The third section of the chapter focuses on the countless ways in which interviewed fathers actually spent time with their children. The fourth section ushers in an astonishing finding, the degree to which interviewed fathers aligned their religious beliefs with their fatherhood experience. Taken together, these sections coalesce to dispel many of the myths associated with the misguided premise that Black men are innately criminal and careless fathers.

6.1 From “Street Life” to Embracing Fatherhood

Nearly 70 percent of interviewed fathers (16) explicitly spoke to how fatherhood prompted them to change their lives for the better. For many of these fathers, their children literally gave them something to live for, as many of them withdrew from “street life” so that they could secure conventional employment. Fatherhood, for these men, ultimately provided them with a sense of focus they never had, thereby altering their decision making so that they could meet the demands of fatherhood.

For example, Calvin discussed, at length, why it was important to distance himself from activities that could lead to his incarceration, thus embracing his fatherhood responsibilities. When asked to reflect on what his life would be like if he did not have children, Calvin offered the following reply:

If I didn’t have my kids. I probably would’ve been more of a hothead. I probably would’ve been more carefree. I second guess things now. I think twice about things
now… Now since I know I got something to live for, I got some people that look up to me, feel what I’m saying? I got some obligations to fulfill. So, I can’t just be stupid no more… I done learned and got old. So, I know now… I done moved around 7 different prisons. I done seen all type of people in prison. I done seen murderers. I done seen lawyers. I done seen judges. I done seen child molesters. The list goes on. When you go in jail, you meet any and everybody in the world, bruh… It kind of helped me, but hurt me at the same time. Like, it helped me to wake up. Like, “*** you got babies, bruh. You got kids. Tighten up.” And so, me having kids, that made me look at my life different. So, if I didn’t have them, I’d probably be doing something else. Whenever you get kids, it makes you cherish the things that you have a little bit more…

In Calvin’s extensive response to my question, he also attributed his decision to turn over a new leaf to the experience of one of his former cellmates. Calvin stated:

…I know about this situation with this dude I was in jail with. His girl and kids were about to get put out the house. So, he went and robbed Family Dollar. And they took 10 years of his life because of that. Even though he gave his girl the money to pay the rent that month, that’s nothing after he got locked up. He got 10 years and wasn’t going to be around his children because of the decision that he made.

Calvin’s remarks serve as a stern refutation to the unrelenting controlling images routinely applied to Black fathers (e.g., violent criminals and deadbeat dads) in two distinct ways. First, while Calvin acknowledges that his past indiscretions contributed to his incarceration, and thereby created physical separation between him and his children, the fact still remains that he had a great deal of remorse. Indeed, Calvin’s imprisonment was the end result of him being criminally convicted and sentenced to temporary life behind bars. However, if the common stereotype of Black men being inherently immoral was accurate, then Calvin would not possess the moral capacity to see the error of his ways. Instead, the opposite would ring true, and Calvin’s statements about his past misdeeds would confirm that Black men, like he, are intrinsically criminal.

Second, Calvin’s words undoubtedly suggest that his children inspired his renewed worldview, ultimately implying that he cares for his children and welcomes the opportunity to support them. If the “deadbeat” father controlling image applied to Calvin, his response to my question would have suggested so. But since his rhetoric did not, there is good reason to question
the validity of the “deadbeat” father trope. In both cases, Calvin’s ability to intensely reflect - a form of mental resistance to systemic oppression (Feagin 2006:60–65) - on how fatherhood prompted him to make better life choices stands in stark contrast to dominant narratives about the innate capabilities of Black men and Black fathers.

Another father, Don, acknowledged how fatherhood forced him to pull away from activities that could lead to his premature death or imprisonment. Don’s remarks illustrate this fact in a poignant fashion:

Shit, me personally, I don’t know what I’d be doing. Like, I don’t know if I’d be locked up or dead. I don’t know. Like that’s why I say like, I really changed when I had my boy, know what I’m saying? Like it really changed my whole lifestyle ‘cause I was out there running the card, know what I’m saying? I was slangin’ dope, you feel me? But after I had my boy, I cut all that loose. So, like I said, I don’t know if I’d be locked up or somewhere in the ground or something. I don’t know…

Similarly, Devin, a residential father of two young children, also touches on how fatherhood deterred him from “street life.” The ensuing comments illuminate this point:

I think I would be behind bars to be honest. Yeah. I think I would be behind bars. Because, before they came, I was living so reckless like…so f*cking reckless. Yeah, I was just really f*cking up like a lot... So, I think would have been in jail, ‘cause I didn’t have somebody guiding me. Personally, I wasn’t doing nothing but dumb sh*t in life. So yeah, I think I would either be in jail or dead to be honest.

In Devin’s lengthy, but rather eye-opening response, he also stated the following:

I was out of a job for about 6 months. And you know, she [kid’s mother] was taking care of everything. And, I kind of refused to go back and do sh*t that I know how to do. Like, I know how to run into somebody’s house. I know how to steal something and get a little money for it. Like, I know how to do that. I know how go and steal a car, and I know how to drop a mother f*cker dead to get some money from them. But for 6 months straight, I feel like there is no point of me doing that. Because if I do it, it’s quick money, but I can get locked up. I can be locked up, you know? And I already have so much sh*t on my record already. If I do something stupid, I’m going to be sentenced for 3 or 4 years. Then I can’t see my kids, I can’t do what I want to. So, for 6 months I didn’t have a job at all, and that sh*t killed me every day. Because I know how to go get money. But I would tell myself “I can’t go back to that lifestyle ‘cause I got kids.” You know? I can’t take 6 months sitting around and everyday looking for a job. You know? The first 4 or 5 months, like, people weren’t calling me back. None of that sh*t.
Nat’s remarks are also consistent with those of Don and Devin’s:

Yeah. If I hadn’t had ***, man… life wouldn’t be what it is now. So, before I had ***, I was working, and I was also in the streets dealing. The day I found out *** was conceived, I basically gave up the whole street life and basically turned it all the way positive with no negativity. And I had to. I felt like it for myself and my son. I don’t know what life would be like without ***. But I know I was involved in a lot of wrong things that I shouldn’t have been involved in. And I know about 5 years later, it would have been even deeper. So, life without *** could have been bad. So, I’m very appreciative for him. He helped me control myself and live for someone. You know, having to be there for someone at all times. So, it could have been pretty bad.

Don, Devin, and Nat’s remarks offer a two-fold message: (1) the popular stereotype of Black men being *innately* criminal and dangerous warrants reconsideration; and (2) Black fathers love their children so much that they are willing to part ways with “street life.” Moreover, all three fathers speak to escaping the negative trappings of their former life and gravitating toward a more descent existence. This has been much easier said than done for these men, especially given the institutional barriers they confronted daily. As a matter of fact, Devin’s emotionally captivating statement requires special attention for this very reason.

In an unabashed manner, Devin gave me a glimpse of the felonious thoughts that occasionally torment him and contribute to what appears to be an internal civil war being waged between his better and worse angels. Found in Devin’s remarks are the culpable parties responsible for him even entertaining the thought of engaging in illicit behavior: structural racism and economic deprivation. Devin firmly understands that he must be financially stable to support his children. Devin is unable to do so, however, because of the routine employment discrimination he experiences on the account of his ex-offender status. This is why to ensure that his children are not the unfortunate victims of privation, Devin sometimes harbors thoughts about obtaining money illegally, which could ultimately land him back in prison. Since Devin resists these urges to engage in illegal activities to support his children, he deserves a great deal of credit. Arguably, Devin’s children have helped to place a wedge between him and a life of crime.
Greg and Jerry are another set of fathers who recognize their children as the saving grace in their lives. Once upon a time, both men were quick-tempered, occasionally exercised poor judgment, and acted selfishly. However, that all changed following the birth of their children. “The things you do when you don’t have children, you don’t necessarily do those things anymore. I will say my kids have calmed me down a great deal,” Greg stated. Further elaborating on how his child changed his life, Greg had this to offer:

Say for instance you get into an argument at a bar, you’ll think twice about that same argument. I say to myself, “If I go outside and get stabbed or shot, how is this going to affect my child? How is this going to affect my family?” Versus if you don’t have a child, that doesn’t cross your mind. You don’t have a care in the world. You’re just living off impulse.

Similarly, Jerry also felt that his children brought a level of stability and tranquility to his life:

The kids, they slowed me down… I don’t know what I would be doing right now if I didn’t have them. Hopefully, I wouldn’t be in any trouble. I would get into a lot of trouble before I had kids. My kids forced me to grow up. The part I left out… I was involved in gangs. Got arrested a few times. But after I had kids, they slowed me down.

No longer interested in engaging in activities that jeopardized their safety, these fathers intensely reflected on how their children helped to keep the Grim Reaper at bay. “I’d probably wouldn’t have no life. I probably be dead. Ain’t no telling. They slowed me down. Ain’t no telling where I would be if I didn’t have my children,” noted Joseph. Equally appreciative of his children, Oscar mentioned that without his children that he “probably wouldn’t be on this earth” because he “use to be disrespectful, like very disrespectful.” Luckily, both of these fathers are now charting different paths because of their children. Oscar and Joseph’s ability and willingness to engage in intense reflectivity helps to challenge the erroneous assumptions associated with the gendered depictions of Black men as inherently violent and Black fathers as “deadbeats.”

Jalen is another father whose response to my question helps to illustrate this point:

Well, my life, I don’t know. I’m a honest. I’m happy I had kids. If I didn’t, I’d probably be in a chain gang or something. They slow me down… They slow me
They are the reason why I’m still free. I don’t think about myself. I think about my kids. I have kids. I got to think about do I want my kids calling another man, daddy. I don’t want that. I want to raise my own kids. I don’t want no ‘nother man raising my kids…

Likewise, Marty feels as if he owes his children “the world” because they stopped him from traveling further “down the wrong road.” According to Marty:

…I probably wouldn’t be as calm as I am right now. I probably would be out in the streets more, you know, ‘cause certain things I can’t go out there and do because I got to look at my kids’ faces. If I do something stupid, they’ll be like “is that my dad doing that?” They keep me calm and sane. They really saved my life.

Fathers like Darius and Derrick also alluded to how fatherhood was the impetus behind their decision to change. According to Darius, fatherhood has forced him to make “sacrifices” and “go the extra mile” for his son. “I think about him before I do anything that I think will affect him in a bad way,” Darius further adds. Additionally, Derrick, who had years of experience as a stepfather to his ex-wife’s children, viewed his life differently once he had his “own” child. As he states, “When I got my own kid, that’s when I said, ‘Okay now, I got to start growing up.’”

Derrick, like countless other Black fathers mentioned in this section, challenged and resisted the controlling images of the violent criminal and “deadbeat” father through their intense reflectivity. Pushing back against the notion that Black men are unperceptive and unreflective, the mental resistance that interviewed fathers engaged in challenge popular culture depictions that incessantly rob them of their humanity and strip them of their personal agency. The narratives of interviewed fathers found within this section call into question the disingenuous representations of Black men as innately criminal and Black fathers as “deadbeats” that flood mainstream media.

6.2 Paternal Caring that Goes Unnoticed

Again, the notion that Black fathers do not care for their children is a popular myth that is perpetually attached to them (Dixon 2017; Fragile Families Research Brief 2000). The “deadbeat” farther controlling image is greatly influenced by this belief, as it has been argued elsewhere, that
young disadvantaged Black fathers merely impregnate women in an effort to boost their social status among their peer group (Anderson 1989). As the story goes, they do so because they never planned on rearing their children in the first place (Bennett 2001:71–100). However, my findings do not support this view. In fact, in staunch opposition to the “deadbeat” father controlling image, interviewed fathers actually care a great deal for their children, even when they are prevented from spending time with them. In many instances, instead of accepting the fact that they cannot see their children as some sort of uncontrollable fate, fathers courageously pressed onward and made efforts to be in their lives. For some fathers, this was an emotionally draining process, as we will witness later in this section.

Despite being denied unrestricted access to their children, interviewed fathers never allowed the thoughts of their children to vacate their mind. For those fathers involved in conflicted co-parenting relationships – co-parenting arrangements characterized by having high levels of conflict and low levels of cooperation (Maccoby and Mnookin 1992) - there was never a day when they were not thinking about reconnecting with their children. Calvin was one of those fathers.

Calvin made the conscious decision to break-up with the mother of his second set of children because “she was having sex with some other dude.” Once the relationship dissolved, Calvin was repeatedly barred from seeing his children by their mother, although he “always wants to be with them kids.” Determined to see his children, Calvin calls the mother of his kids every day, regardless if she answers, hoping that she will eventually succumb to his persistent badgering and grant him access to his children. Calvin’s below statement better illustrate this point:

…I called her yesterday like, “You really gunna keep on going with this?” I ain’t seen these folks in all this time. Now c’mon... I ain’t even seen ‘em for Thanksgiving, now that I’m thinking. The last time I saw them was 2 days before Thanksgiving. I ain’t even see ‘em on Thanksgiving. She the one causing the problems. But I’m working on it. I’m working on her every day. I call her every day. I reach out to her every day. She might not want to let me see my kids, but I try every day. I do it every single day…
While describing his struggle to connect with his children in another statement, Calvin also had this to say:

...See, she is keeping the kids away from me too. Ain’t that’s some s***, keeping them kids away from me. I want to take care of my kids.

Calvin’s remarks are illustrative of a fact that is often swept under the rug within mass media reports on Black fatherhood: that most Black fathers yearn to “take care” of their kids. Due to forces outside of their control, however, it is difficult for them to do so. This was surely the case for Calvin, despite his noble efforts to dismantle the communication barriers that stood between him and the mother of his children. If the “deadbeat” father controlling image applied to Calvin, I highly doubt that he would be exerting so much energy to see his children.

Similar to Calvin, Julian also hits a brick wall whenever trying to contact his out-of-state son. “…he moved to Tennessee. He was here in Atlanta. I was active in his life,” Julian says in a melancholy tone. When Julian was asked why he has been unable to see his son, he replied, “She [son’s mother] told me a long time ago, ‘I just don’t want my son around you.’” After administering a series of probes, Julian eventually spoke to exactly why he believes his son’s mother denies him access to his son. From Julian’s perspective, his precarious financial situation is the reason. Despite being the victim of maternal stonewalling, Julian still manages to put his best foot forward when trying to see his son. Julian’s below remarks illustrate this point:

I just keep reaching out and try to let her know we all grown. You can’t keep this boy away from me ‘cause I didn’t pay the child support this month. That shouldn’t have anything to do with me not seeing my son. I been trying to reach out to her. Money ain’t everything. If I ain’t got it, I ain’t got it. I trying to be here for these kids... It just doesn’t make sense. You trying to make it seem like I’m a run away, like I abandoned him. That’s what they signed me up for, child abandonment. I mean they didn’t put me on regular child support. They put me on child abandonment child support because the dude use to try and be me in my business like, “Oh, he got some money.” People are always looking from the outside in. You don’t know what I have. You can look like you have a million dollars and have zero. You know what I mean? So, a whole lot of talking was being done... That’s why she thinks the way she thinks. She thinks I always got some money. It used to be like that, but it’s not like that anymore. Times changed. So, I’ve been trying to talk to
her on that page. You can’t do that. You can’t take him away because the money ain’t there… it’s different if you have it, you know what I’m saying? If you don’t have it, you don’t have it. If that’s what you want to do; you so serious about this money, we’ll let the court deal with it. So, that’s how I’ve been rolling with it.

There is a lot to unpack in Julian’s emotionally charged response.

First, Julian, like Calvin, admits to attempting to make contact with his out-of-state son, despite the possibility of rejection. Nevertheless, he continues to reach out to his son’s mother even though he is certain that her disposition will likely remain the same. Second, Julian challenges the notion that his value as a father is necessarily tied to his financial stability. While money matters, Julian flatly asserts that “money ain’t everything.” Though not stated explicitly, Julian’s remarks imply that he desires for his non-instrumental fatherhood contributions to be valued in the same manner that his instrumental contributions would. Because, at this point, they are wholly undervalued. Unlike the benchmarks of financial dependence that are purportedly the most essential aspects of fatherhood, Julian’s remarks suggest he is in favor of expanding the gender ideology yardstick of hegemonic masculinity. From Julian’s perspective, being unable to adequately provide for his son should not call into question his commitment to his responsibilities as a father. If anything, it would be more apt for Julian to come under fire as a negligent parent if he was not looking to expand the boundaries of what it means to be a father given his financial woes.

Third, and perhaps most revealing, are Julian’s last set of comments about allowing “the court deal with it.” It is an empirically verifiable fact that Black Americans, and especially Black men, are subjected to disparate treatment within the criminal justice system (Hinton, Henderson, and Reed 2018). There is also compelling evidence suggesting that Black men, like Julian, with unpaid child support debt are much more likely to be incarcerated due to their arrears (Clary et al. 2017; Pate, Jr. 2016; Patterson 2008). Therefore, the fact that Julian would willingly solicit court intervention so that he can gain access to his son is worth highlighting. “Deadbeat” fathers, based
on how they are described within mass media, would never go to such extremes to spend time with their children. To the contrary, they would gladly accept the fact that their children are out of sight, as they were never in their mind to begin with. Julian’s steadfast efforts to revive a relationship with his son obviously disabuses this misguided notion.

In another segment of the interview, Julian begins to reflect on the fond moments he shared with his son when things were much more pleasant. However, these enjoyable memories quickly faded. Toward the end of Julian’s reminiscence, he immediately remembers that he has not seen his son in quite some time. According to Julian,

He’s 9 now. He’ll be 10 in February. So, out of 9 years, I know at least 7 of those years I was there strong. Every summer he was coming; every spring break; every birthday; Christmas; holidays; Thanksgiving. He was always getting dropped off and stuff like that. But now, it’s just like I try and reach out to him, and they don’t want to interact.

Again, it is worth noting that despite the regular opposition that Julian encounters, he constantly attempts to see his son. However, to no avail. Again, if the assumptions associated with the “deadbeat” Black father applied here, then Julian would not care about spending time his son, let alone ponder the possibility.

Like Calvin and Julian, Joseph and Kendrick also intensely reflected about how not seeing their children made them feel. In Joseph’s case, the mother of his nonresident children did allow him to see his children, although, according to him, it was always at her convenience. Joseph’s words sum up the matter better than I can:

Well... I’ll tell you this, she does give me opportunity to be in their life. But when she’s mad, she won’t let me see them. The longest she kept me from them was for about a month. She always come around though. She’ll get mad, then realize she need me. Then she’ll call me. “Oh, can you pick them up from school tomorrow, and I say I got them.” I pick them up for 2 days then, next thing you know, she back mad at me. And she be using me. I think she get paid that Friday. So, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, then Thursday she cut me off. I’m talking about, like, right before she gets paid. She mad at me all of a sudden. How the f***? That’s her strategy. I learned it. She is cool with me when she ain’t got no money. Then when
she finna get that check, she don’t f*** with me no more. I’m telling you, for real. That’s exactly what she does.

When I asked Joseph how having restricted access to his children made him feel, he had this to say:

“I hate when I can’t see my babies. I hate when I can’t get to them.” Kendrick’s story is somewhat identical to Joseph’s. However, there are a few key distinctions that make Kendrick’s story dissimilar Josephs. Most notably, Kendrick’s experiences with maternal gatekeeping occurred in the aftermath of divorcing his ex-wives.

For example, following his first botched marriage, Kendrick moved away from the city of Chicago “to make some money.” However, he returned to Chicago often to “visit his boys,” or at least those were his intentions. But whenever he came into town, his ex-wife “made it difficult” for him to see them. Kendrick’s following remarks help to illustrate this point:

Yeah, she made it difficult. She had gotten married to this guy; he was controlling and s*** like that. As I’m bouncing, you know, I’m coming back to the city, I want to see my kids. She says “yeah.” Then when I get into town, I couldn’t get ahold of her. She moved a lot. So, I didn’t know where the kids were at. She made it difficult.

Fast forward roughly 20 years, Kendrick finds himself in a fairly identical situation. The key difference, however, is that Kendrick is the main caregiver for his second set of children.

Nevertheless, before Kendrick could gain primary custody of his children, his second ex-wife put him through the wringer to see his children. According to Kendrick,

Oh, she made it hard… she made it hard! Took me to court and everything. Had me kicked out my own house with my own furniture and took my kids. Called the police and had me kicked out my house. Police came and took the kids right out of my hand. I had to pay an attorney to go to court just to see my kids and get my kids 50% of the time. They wouldn’t even let me back in my house. They wouldn’t let me get any of my stuff. So, she made it very difficult for me at one point. She was being vindictive or whatever the case may be, you know? She made it very difficult when I was the one taking care of the children. I’m the one supporting the children. I’m the one making sure they get back and forth to school and making sure they got a roof over their head, a bed to sleep in, clothes on their back, and food to eat…

Nat is another father who struggled to gain access to his son following a divorce.
After getting married, within a year, Nat and his wife received a surprise package from the stork, as they soon discovered they were expecting their first child together. As Nat stated, the pregnancy was “unplanned but wanted. It was a very exciting moment though… I was ecstatic and overjoyed… I was jumping up and down.” However, soon after the birth of their son, the initial wave of excitement surrounding the marital couple’s first child vanished into thin air.

Nat and his wife’s marriage ended due to irreconcilable differences, which, from Nat’s perspective, primarily stemmed from his wife’s alcohol addiction. Therefore, Nat felt it was best for them to “just separate” and “work on co-parenting” because of a “bunch of unforeseen things like abuse…physical abuse” where he was the “victim.” Also, due to major disagreements between Nat and his ex-wife, Nat was consistently denied access to his son for 3 years, which was the toughest thing he dealt with in his life:

The greatest challenge I’ve ever had was not being able to see my kid when I wanted to. Being restricted from my son’s life was the most challenging thing that I’ve ever dealt with in my life. Knowing that my son wants to talk to me, and I can’t talk to him. Knowing that he wants to see me, and I can’t see him. That was very challenging. That was very hurtful. It broke me down and made me more focused.

However, after a wearisome and grueling legal battle, Nat ultimately gained full custody of his son.

Below Nat describes what that process was like for him:

When she had custody, it was definitely hard for me to see ***. She made it hard for me, but I stayed resilient. I stayed hungry to be in my son’s life, and I didn’t let it get me down. I saw my son 5 times in a 3-year span. You know I still didn’t let it get me down. I still worked diligently and hard. Yeah… it was hard, man. I had no lawyer; I had no money for the lawyer. So, I had to hit the law library, and hit the court rooms. I did numerous court dates, parenting classes, fatherhood programs, nothing changed. And then one day, I figured out what I really needed to do, and I got the court date that I needed, which brought forth the custody.

Here again we witness two Black fathers – Kendrick and Nat – willing to engage in legal battles to ensure their lawful rights to spend time with their children are not ignored. These fathers demonstrate a dogged determination to be in their kid’s lives, which flies in the face of the “deadbeat” father controlling image.
Marty, a father of five by three different women, is another father haunted by the pain of being denied access to his children. Specifically, his second set of children who were born in wedlock. Prior to Marty divorcing his ex-wife, “everything was good” in their relationship. However, once their “relationship broke off,” that’s when things changed. At that moment, according to Marty, “she didn’t support” him in his efforts to be a father. As Marty puts it:

Before, I was the greatest dad in the world. “Oh yeah, my husband is such a great dad.” But then we fell apart and it was like, “Oh no, he’s not a great dad. He’s nothing. I don’t want him around the kids.”

Later in the interview, Marty went on to describe how emotionally distraught he has been behind the whole ordeal:

The fact that she has made a decision, a conscious decision on her own, not to allow me and my children to interact. That’s horrible. The fact that she feels she knows what’s best of them when she’s still learning as well is crazy. She’s not willing to listen to outside influence. Um, the fact that she’s just stuck in her ways and not willing to communicate with me or compromise with me. It’s horrible… That’s been a thorn in my side for a long time. I wish there was a way I could make it better. I wish we could meet somewhere in the middle, but that really is a stressful situation for me… it’s pretty hurtful. Pretty hurtful, man, pretty hurtful.

Furthermore, when Marty was asked what he wishes would be different about his relationship with his kid’s mother, he had this to say:

I wish she would just let go and allow me and my kids to naturally do what we’re built to do and that’s communicate, so I can nurture them in my way. That way we’ll have our own relationship and bond. They’ll judge me basically on how we get along and not how she feels about what happened between me and her.

Nowhere throughout Marty’s remarks do I find evidence of a father shirking his parental duties. To the contrary, Marty’s emotionally charged words reflect the polar opposite. Not only does Marty yearn to spend time with his second set of children, but he also wants to bond with them in ways that he knows will strengthen their individual relationships. Because he is being prevented from doing so, Marty has become internally anguished. Phrases like “it’s pretty hurtful,” “it’s horrible,” and “that’s been a thorn in my side” give credence to the emotional pain Marty
confronts daily because he is unable to spend time with his children. Had Marty demonstrated the comportment indicative of a father who does not care for his children, then emotive adjectives such as the ones Marty voiced would not have rolled off his tongue during our interview. Therefore, by expressing his emotional vulnerability, Marty is challenging the “deadbeat” father controlling image.

Mike is another father being actively denied access to his child, although he openly admits that the child may not be his biologically. Mike made his sexual debut during his high school years, which eventually led to him becoming a teenage father. While it is unknown whether Mike is the father of the young boy, the fact remains that he believes he is. The below interview excerpt details the ambivalence surrounding Mike’s paternity status with the young boy he believes is his biological son:

She had him when we were in high school. And, when she had him…she had a dude that… the dude she named him after was who she was in a relationship with. So, I just didn’t want to be there. Her mom wanted me to sign the birth certificate and also get a blood test. But, when she was having the baby, nobody called me to say, “Come to the hospital and get a DNA test to make sure.” ‘Cause I… I never denied him. Until this day, I still don’t deny him. I just don’t know. That’s a big burden on me. Everybody been asking me, why didn’t I name my son Junior. The only reason I didn’t is because I got this kid that I don’t know nothing about. And I don’t know if he’s mine ‘cause she was telling me it’s not mine… Then, the baby started to get older, and the baby started to look just like me. Like, the man looks just like me. Like, if you ask my great grandmother, she would tell you that I spit that child out. Like, he looks just like me. He walks like me. Smiles like me. He does everything like me. But she tells me that he ain’t mine. So, I just want to get a test to prove it. And as far as our relationship, we don’t get along at all. We can’t sit without yelling or arguing… I don’t know what it is. I really dislike that girl because of what she’s taking that kid through. ‘Cause I don’t wanna wait till this kid gets older and he come to me asking, “Why you never tried?” Then, I have to tell him my story all over again. “Dude, that was your mom.” People think it’s the father not doing the
right thing. Sometimes it’s not the father. Sometimes it’s the mother. That hurts the father and the kid. Sometimes, they take the kid from the father.

When I asked Mike how the whole situation made him feel, he shared the following:

It made me feel like, yo, this ain’t about your relationship. This is about the child, you know? Like, the child, he deserves to know who his biological father is. Like, no, don’t take whatever your mistake is against your child. That’s not right!

Again, here is another case where a father has discussed, at length, how important it is for him to have an active presence in his child’s life, which challenges the stereotypical assumption that Black fathers do not care for their children. Additionally, to further complicate matters, Mike’s explicit efforts to establish paternity is a clear-cut example of a Black father acting responsibly. For Mike, his responsible paternal actions come as a blow to “deadbeat” father stereotype, which is routinely applied to Black fathers like himself.

Melvin is also a victim of maternal gatekeeping. However, despite being denied access to his nonresident daughter, Melvin still makes it a priority to reach out the mother to bury the hatchet between the two of them. According to Melvin,

I try call and talk to them, but her momma on some other stuff right now. So, every time I call, she just ignores my calls. I just look at it when she gets time, or when she gets ready, she knows my number; she’ll get a hold of me. We are going through that bull right now...It makes me feel angry, and then another part of me say “I don’t care,” you know what I’m saying? That numbness coming back like, “Oh well, I don’t give a fuck.” I ain’t gonna stress over it. I already got a lot going on as it is, and I don’t need more piling up on me.

Additionally, at a later point in the interview, Melvin also had this to say about making the most of his time with his daughter whenever he could see her:

Any chance I get to spend time with her, I do. You know what I’m saying? When the mom allows me... you know? So, I just try, every chance I get, to spend time with her and do things. I try to get her to remember my face and my voice just in case her mom decide she wants to keep her away from me again. This way, at least she’ll still have some type of memory of me...
In Melvin’s remarks, two things are evident: (1) he makes efforts to call the mother of his daughter to arrange some type of visitation, despite knowing he will likely be met with resistance by the mother; and (2) the entire ordeal brings an added sense of frustration to his already hectic life, hence him saying “It makes me feel angry, and then another part of me say ‘I don’t care’” and “I already got a lot going on as it is, and I don’t need more piling up on me.” Within both of these points lie a deeper meaning, Melvin vacillates between the degree to which he should directly invest his energy into reconciling his differences with his daughter’s mother. While it is unquestionably important for him to have a relationship with his daughter, the stress of it all can create additional emotional strain in Melvin’s life that he is not properly equipped to deal with at the moment.

Sticking with the theme of emotional pain, statements made by Zion, Billy, Jalen, and Calvin help to bring this issue into sharper focus. For example, Zion grew up without his father actively involved in his life. As a result, he wants to break the cycle of “fatherlessness” that has beset his family. However, it is hard for Zion to achieve this when he is unable to find middle ground with the mother of his children. Because Zion is unable to spend time with his children, he often finds himself grief-stricken. When asked how he feels whenever he cannot see his children, Zion offered the following statement:

That make me feel down. S***, not seeing my kids hurts. Like, I want to… I know how it was when I was in that situation like as far as my dad doing that to me. So, I’m just trying to change that. So, that just make me feel real down ‘cause I’m trying to break this cycle. This cycle got to break somewhere. So, I’m determined to be a part of my kids’ lives. I’m going to be in my kids’ life.

Billy’s story is painfully similar. Like Zion, the mother of Billy’s daughter prohibits him from spending time with her, although he desires to. “Man, we spend no time. It has been a long time. And that hurt me. It hurts me every day,” Billy utters. On the rare occasion that Billy is able to see his daughter, what he hopes would be a pleasant experience never comes to fruition. Instead,
Billy is vividly reminded that his daughter has vague recollections of him as her biological father, which hurts him deeply. Here is an example of what occurred the last time Billy saw his daughter:

I just seen her recently. It hurt me. I just told my aunt. It hurt me. I see that little girl talk. She looks just like me. And just the other day, her mother called me to say she was bullied in school. But she was saying like it was my fault. But how can it be my fault if you took me out of the picture? You told her I’m not her dad and all of that. It’s just… my life has been so crazy. Her mother… She tells the girl I ain’t her daddy. So, when I saw her that day, she didn’t even want to walk up to me. I felt…You know how you feel the connection with your children and all, but with her, she was just scared to come to me. So, I ain’t just going to force it and start grabbing her. ‘Cause I don’t know how she would react. So, I just fell back and talked to her. But she looks so much like me. We got to talk. She said somebody bullied her at school and left her with a black eye. And I’m like, “What is your mother doing over there? What is your step-dad doing?” It’s just crazy.

Similarly, Jalen had this to say when describing how he felt about being denied access to one of his children:

That hurt me. That hurt me. That hurt me! That’s just how I’m going to put it basically, and then I’m going to be done with that! Just use yourself as an example. If your baby momma was treating you how my people treat me, how would you feel? Feel hurting inside… That’ll make you wanna… I can’t say it ‘cause you are recording, but that’ll make you wanna…

In perhaps the most extreme case, Calvin has begun to abuse various substances to deaden the emotional pain he feels whenever he cannot see his children. According to Calvin,

I smoke weed and drink liquor, but I’m not a beer drinker like that. I drink Tequila, but I saw myself drink like 3 $10 bottles of Tequila. I’m talking about by myself. To the point where I wasn’t sharing. It turned into a problem because of this situation with **** and these kids. I was spending $30 a day. I was drinking by myself. That’s a lot. I’m talking ‘bout every day. It was the first thing I did in the morning. I would go to the liquor store…

For all four of these fathers, their emotional anguish stemmed from their inability to spend time with the very children they helped to create. Time and time again, the narratives of these fathers revealed that the love they had for their children was unconditional and undying. However, without having legitimate chances to express their love toward their children, these fathers missed out on valuable opportunities to fulfill their parental obligations, which they absolutely embraced.
The testimonies of these fathers help to challenge the stereotypical notion that Black fathers do not care about their children by indicating that such fathers actually care deeply about their offspring.

6.3 Being There

Another way interviewed fathers challenged the “deadbeat” father cliché was through their fatherly acts. Although I was unable to observe how fathers interacted with their children, their narratives provide rich information on how they viewed the substantive nature of their paternal duties. The in-depth interviews revealed that 100 percent of fathers’ paternal behaviors revolved around some aspect of “being there” for their children. Specifically, fathers placed a high premium on the various ways in which they directly engaged with their children. Fathers purposefully enacted these activities to strengthen their relationships with their children and ensure they were kept safe at all times. As expressed by the fathers during their interviews, their paternal duties were manifested in two principal ways: (1) by spending quality time with their children; and (2) through monitoring and protecting their children. The below subsections highlight these two crucial aspects of “being there.”

6.3.1 Spending Quality Time with Children – Father-Child Bonds

To start, fathers spent quality time with their children in ways that built and sustained father-child bonds. By father-child bond, I am referring to the various manners in which pro-social relationships are cultivated between fathers and their children. A well-known typology exists in for father-child bonds (Marsiglio and Roy 2012:65–70), which emphasizes the importance of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional bonds. This particular typology was the bedrock of analysis when assessing the interpersonal bonds between fathers and their children.

6.3.1.1 Spending Quality Time with Children – Behavioral Bonds

Of all the codes generated on father-child bonds, those specific to behavioral activities were abundant. The behavioral expressions between fathers and their children primarily played itself out
through shared activities that encourage pro-social attachment. For example, Greg, who jointly holds the title of single and social father, spends much time with his toddler son, whereby they engage in exuberant play activities. Whenever they are not “tussling” with one another, they “watch movies” or “go to the park,” which leads Greg to believe his relationship with his “son is beautiful.” Below is a heartwarming summation of a sequence of events that occurred between Greg and his son:

He [Greg’s son] was trying to ride the scooter like a low rider bike. He would sit down on it, trying to ride it like a bike. But then I got on the scooter with him to help him use it. Now he knows how to use it by watching me use it. So, I let him do that. He loves to run, he’s very fast. Loves to run, so I take him to the little playground area in the apartment complex, and I’ll be like “You can’t get me.” We’ll just take off running and we’ll run around, run around, and run around. We come inside, and I give him a bath and he’s ready to go to sleep. He likes to sit up under me, watching a movie, up under me. And if something catches his attention, he’ll jump up and look at you and be like “Woooowwww, did you see that?!?!”

Milton is another father who accentuates the beauty of cultivating behavioral bonds with his offspring. Due to a host of unfortunate circumstances, Milton is forced to be a nonresident father, which he loathes. Nonetheless, Milton makes the best out of spending quality time with his children whenever the opportunity arises. In these precious moments, Milton learns about the untapped potential of his progeny. Milton offers the following remarks for illustrative purposes:

Like my son… I didn’t think that my son could run that fast. When I was running, he decided to run behind me. Usually, it’s been a while since my son was running like that, but now he can run real fast. The thing is I use to strap weights on him, not heavy weights, but a weight that he could handle, you know? I took the weights off, and he runs much faster. You never know what your kids are capable of. You know what I mean? I think for me, teaching my son how to run and jump and things like that, it takes time. And sometimes I felt “When is my so gonna start running, or when he gonna start doing this?” I got to be patient. You know, if I’m patient, everything will start to fall into place. I just have to be more patient.

By cultivating a behavioral bond with his son, Milton’s makeshift weight training program proved to be beneficial in multiple ways. It not only allowed Milton to spend quality time with his
son, but it also promoted healthy living through physical activity and helped Milton to appraise his son’s budding athletic prowess. Darius is another father who bonds with his son over sports.

Compelled to do some “soul-searching” after paralyzing his arm “for ‘bout a year” due to a work injury, Darius prioritized spending time with his son, especially given he is a single-father. This led to Darius teaching his son how to do “push-ups.” In fact, many of the behavioral activities Darius engaged in with his son were primarily in the area of sports. For example, as Darius put it:

He loves basketball. He got a basketball goal right there. We mostly play basketball maybe for ‘bout an hour. We like playing basketball. We out there playing catch with the football. We are working on him playing catch too.

Julian is another father who bonds with his children over sports. Despite being denied access to his oldest son, Julian uses every moment at his disposal to spend quality time with his youngest child, who is the “apple of his eye.” As Julian shares:

We spend time with each other every day. Every morning. Every evening. I take her to school every morning. I pick her up from school every day. We go to the playground every other day. Dealing with this baseball now, we go to the playground every day. That’s pretty much it. We run and play… She like to play baseball. So, we gonna try and put her on a t-ball team next year.

As a committed father, Julian’s makes it a priority not to miss out on a single moment to participate in a shared activity with his young daughter. Julian’s attentiveness as a parent is also on full display. For example, after identifying his daughter’s growing athletic interests, he sets aside time so that he can help her to develop her baseball skills. By acting on his thoughtful observations, Julian is making a targeted investment in his daughter’s future while also supporting her physical health. Julian’s positive paternal behaviors suggest that he is acting as a responsible parent and not an irresponsible father.

Entering the picture now is Joseph. When afforded the opportunity, Joseph pounces on an opportunity to behaviorally connect with his nonresident children. For Joseph, every moment spent with his nonresident children must be intentionally meaningful, as he never knows when he will be
able to see his children again due to the unpredictable behavior of the kid’s mother. As Joseph states:

> When I get them, I take them to the bowling alley. I get them and do thangs. She takes them to the library… I let her do those type of thangs. I take them to the park, to barbeques, and swimming. I spend quality time with them, when she let me. I try to spend as much time as I can with them. Yesterday, we went and got a haircut, and then I took them to the park.

When referencing his resident children, however, Joseph understandably appears to have more free range to behaviorally bond with his children. According to Joseph:

> We usually take them to the pool or sit here [living room] and play our Xbox or PlayStation. We play family games. We go out. We might go out to eat at a restaurant like Chili’s, Red Lobster, you know, Benihana’s, depending on what type of money we have. The fair. They go to the fair every year, and to the circus every year. They go on vacation. We took them to Florida. They finna go to Myrtle Beach. We go on vacation every year. We try to give them something to look forward to every year.

Upon poring over Joseph’s comments, it is patently obvious that he has no problem engaging with his children in a productive manner. However, in both examples, it appears that Joseph’s ability to behaviorally bond with his children is occasionally undermined by external forces. In the case with his nonresidential children, their mother tends to stand between him and his children, which obviously limits how often they can meaningfully engage with one another. In the case with his resident children, Joseph’s financial insecurity sometimes prevents him from winning and dining them at chain operated restaurants. Furthermore, if inadequate finances occasionally hinder Joseph from taking his children to certain eateries, there is also a good chance that he struggles at times to contribute to his family’s out-of-town excursions. In both cases, Joseph’s economic instability could trigger feelings of internal shame for him as seen with many of the fathers profiled in section 5.3 of chapter 5

Jarvis also values the importance of bonding behaviorally with his non-biological sons. As he puts it:
I take them to the court, just so they can get out the house and play basketball. I go out there and shoot basketball with them and go play with them... we do a lot of stuff together. I let him go around and play. I take them to the Arcade. I walk them to the store... We are bonding together. I am playing the games with them. Most fathers around here don't do that. And these aren't even my biological kids. You feel me? The baby’s father don't know how to get money. Ain’t no way he should be on child-support. He should be taking care of his kids. And now he wonders why they be calling me daddy. Who is taking care of the kids? Me! I make breakfast for them. I just be me. I love the kids. I love those boys. I will do what I can to make sure that they have everything they need.

Jarvis further adds that:

I play with them. I wrestle with them. We just have fun. They like it when I slam them on the bed or couch. They get hyper, and I love to see the smile on their face... Wrestle with him to make him tougher. I might watch wrestling with them. Watch TV with them. Talk to them. Pretend like I'm fighting with them and playing with them. Go outside with them and have a good time. I take them to play basketball court. I take them jogging. We sit out on the porch and just talk.

Based on Jarvis’s above statements, it is an unquestionable fact that he loves his non-biological children as if they are his own. Through the behavioral bonds Jarvis is creating with his children, he is undoubtedly contributing to their physical well-being. Another point must be made about segments of Jarvis’s comments. As evident in Jarvis’s first block quote, he views his commitment to the social institution of fatherhood is the exception rather than the rule.

6.3.1.2 Spending Quality Time with Children – Cognitive Bonds

Fathers also engaged in cognitive activities with their children in an effort to build and sustain positive bonds with them. The cognitive bonds developed between fathers and their children were based on fathers and their offspring teaching each other something of value. As a distinct tool for strengthening father-child relationships, some examples of cognitive development occurred whenever fathers taught their children how to “cook” or “ride a bike.” However, in some instances, fathers employed unorthodox methods to ensure their children were on track to reach their developmental milestones. Calvin’s nonconformist approach to potty training serves as a striking example:
So, I’m teaching her [daughter] how to use the bathroom the same way I did with my son, she in the bathroom with me too. That’s how I potty trained them. Every
time I use the bathroom, they in the bathroom with me. Junior never used the pot.
He ain’t never use no pot. He ain’t never use no pot! Christian never used no pot.
Them folks got right on the toilet. They went from pampers to toilet. They got
pampers, pull ups, pot, toilet. That’s how it’s supposed to go right? I ain’t go that
way. I went straight from pampers to toilet. I said I ain’t buying ‘em [pampers] no
more. I bought them some drawers. I went and bought 5 pairs of drawers for both of
them… They don’t even pee in the bed, so I know I did something good…

In another example, Calvin discusses how his children have picked up a thing or two from him in
the kitchen. “They be like, ‘Oh, Daddy showed me how to cook on the grill. Daddy showed me
how to cook grits this morning, ma,’” Calvin eagerly asserts.

Following in Calvin’s footsteps, Alvin also dances to the beat of his own drum when
cognitively bonding with his children. During “family discussions,” Alvin is quick to divert his
kids’ attention to “worldly” events that are broadcasted through the media. “We talk about the
news too. I let them keep up with the news,” Alvin states. When asked “what aspects of the news
do you focus on with your children?” Alvin replied as such:

   Well, I try to keep them up to date with politics or war, you know, to get them
   thinking about how the system works, who they think would be the best president. I
   think that’s something kids should be able to figure out. I want them to know what
   the debate is about; what are the good qualities for this party, that party. Those are
   some of the things that I like to cover with them because it will keep them on a
   certain level. I think they will be ahead of other kids.

Other fathers cultivated cognitive bonds with their children in more conventional ways.
Specifically, outside of helping children “with their homework,” fathers also supported their
children’s language and literacy skills by reading to them. While reminiscing on certain aspects his
childhood, one father poignantly stated why he prioritizes his kids’ education. As Devin put it: “I
read to them a lot too. I make sure I read to them, ‘cause I know that was something that I didn’t
get… like, nobody read to me at bedtime or stuff like that.”
Darius, who is a single custody father, seemingly uses every opportunity he has to cognitively engage with his son. From dawn to dusk, Darius is diligently at work with his “mini me,” as seen in the forthcoming quote:

Okay, starting from the morning, we have breakfast together. We start off with breakfast. I prepare breakfast, then we go to the playground... We might do a little writing, watch a little educational TV. Where he’s learning his numbers, and he’s learning his colors. Even before then though, we basically waking up, I was potty training him, you know what I’m saying? I’ll ask him, “You gotta go to the pot-pot?” I start him of like that. Then we’ll go a little further in the day, then we’ll go to the playground or we’ll write. We’ll write circles. I’ll try to get him to do numbers, circles, squares. Like I said, he’s only 2 now, so you know, he’s barely doing things. But he’ll circle, he’ll do a little scribble-scrabble. I got him doing circles now. He almost on squares, you know. Coloring. I try to get him to color and stay inside the lines. That’s the first part.

Darius went on to add the following:

Sometimes I let him help me with stuff. He might just bring a plate to the table or something like that, you know, help him interact with that. We’ll empty the trash together. When it’s time to clean up, he knows how to vacuum the floor. He knows how to pick everything up off the floor when it’s time to clean up in the later part of the day.

When the sun begins to set, Darius takes a somewhat less hands-on approach to help stimulate the cognitive growth of his son. The importance of finding additional ways to supplement his son’s intellectual development is found in the following statement:

Then later in the day I let him watch educational TV. I put the TV on channel 15. That’s the educational channel, man… That show has everything from colors to identifying shapes. It’s very good! It’s very educational. The show that I have him watch on Channel 15 is called Baby First. We spend a lot of time doing that there, man… he wants to see pictures and stuff now. I already have access to that now, so I turn the TV on, and they got pictures of colors and same shapes and puzzles and all that. We interact with that together. That’s a typical day.

Fathers like Calvin, Alvin, Devin, and Darius, all prioritize bonding with their children over shared activities that have a clear cognitive benefit. The rich details of their narratives highlight this fact. The stories these fathers shared help to discredit the legend of the “deadbeat” Black father, as these men all go to great lengths to shape the cognitive development of their infant and toddler-age
children, which will ideally pay huge dividends given 90 percent of the brains develop occurs
during early childhood (Brown and Jernigan 2012).

Earl, Milton, Nat, and Derrick, like the fathers mentioned above, gladly avail themselves as conduits to help their children achieve the pinnacle of their cognitive potential. For example, Earl states:

I help them with their schoolwork. I help them with their homework… When I tuck them in for bed, I read them bedtime stories. Or we will sit in the house and read books. Color or something like that. I will ask them what they learned today. How was your day at school? Do you have homework? We go in the house and I tell them the consequences and the rules. Tell them, “You won't be going outside if you don’t do right.”

Similar to Earl, Milton is also on top of things with his children from an academic standpoint:

I practice the ABCs with them, and sometimes I put some words on the wall like “window.” “That’s the window,” and I’ll point towards the window. My son will come out and I’ll say, “MJ, do you have to use the bathroom?” He’ll say, “Bathroom.” I’ll say, “Where’s the bathroom?” and he points to the bathroom. So, I think that me doing just simple stuff with him that’ll keep his attention. I have him watch cartoons too, and I get different color cards. I’ll write on it like “Orange.” Or “computer” or “tv” or “chair.” Just simple stuff like that, and that’s how I practice with them. And how I communicate with them. I might read books to them. Reading books to them is one of the best things that you can do. When you’re reading to them, you can get them to…they can understand too. My son, he moves the book himself. When I’m finished with a page, he’ll turn the page himself… I like reading to them… I really like exercising, reading, and writing with my kids. I like to write with them and sometimes, I get them to try to write “M” or a “L” or something like that...

As a single-father, Nat is forced to have a more active presence in his young son’s life. As a result, Nat now has more time to engage in cognitively stimulating activities with his son in ways like never before. According to Nat:

We do coloring activities, read books, and work on his scholastic material. Soon as he gets out of school, I pick him up, and we come home. We do homework. We go over sight words, and we read a book. Then after that, it’s on to free time. He usually chooses to either color, draw, or play a game…

Let us now peer into the Derrick’s cognitive bond tactics. In every sense of the word, Derrick is a self-made boss who own’s a company dedicated to allowing children be children. As a single
custody father, Derrick occasionally struggles to find a babysitter to watch his daughter when he has to work. Therefore, she sometimes accompanies him to work and serves as his little helper.

According to Derrick,

"Like on the weekends, I do a lot of kid stuff. The van out there, I don’t know if you saw it, but it got cartoon characters and stuff on it. So, she already done start helping me with work or whatever. Like, if I go work a kid’s party, and I get ready to set up, she helps me break down the bouncer. But she’ll ask me, “Daddy, can I help you?” She helps me with everything. So, I love that. Oh, I be talking to her about what she learned in school a lot. I also talk to her about growing up. Try to see where her mind at and what she’s learning at school.

The paternal actions of the above-mentioned fathers, like many others who bonded over cognitive activities with their children, offer compelling evidence that the “deadbeat” dad controlling image warrants reassessment. Based on the statements made by interviewed fathers, there is no evidence of paternal noninvolvement. If anything, the rich commentary offered by interviewed fathers suggest they are acutely aware of the cognitive needs of their children and are undoubtedly willing to nurture the cerebral gifts of their offspring, to the best of their ability.

6.3.1.3 Spending Quality Time with Children – Emotional Bonds

Compared to the other father-child bonds (e.g., behavioral and cognitive), emotional bonds were discussed the least by the fathers. Nevertheless, while emotional bonds were discussed less often, it is important to note that emotional bond codes were generated for 50 percent of the men. For operational purposes, emotional bonds are inherently nurturing in nature. Fathers who cultivate emotional bonds with their children cater to the sentimental and intimate aspects of their offspring’s being. Don’s euphoric tie to his newborn daughter is a quintessential example of an emotional bond, as seen in the following example:

"Man, it’s like, when she sees me come through the door, she bust out crying. She got to get to me. And like, when I come in the house, I say, “Where my baby at? I got to see my baby!” Like literally, I got to see her! I got to kiss up on her… it’s a relationship that you can’t get enough of."
Nat is another father committed to emotionally bonding with his child. After engaging in a nerve-racking legal battle, Nat gained full custody of his son, who was in “bad shape” developmentally. Dedicated to getting his son “up to his educational standards,” Nat was hell-bent on “loving *** [son]. Living, working, breathing for *** [son].” When asked “In your situation, what does love look like?” Nat shared “Love looks like a smile every time I see my kid. He’s smiling. He’s ready to see me. He can’t wait for me to come through the door. The joy on his face, that’s love for me.”

Fast forward to Earl. The father of two boys (biological and non-biological), Earl has long sought to meaningfully contribute to his family, albeit from a financial standpoint. However, due to his ex-felon status, Earl struggles to find legitimate work, thereby forcing him to redefine his role as a parent. Under these circumstances, Earl now assumes the household responsibility of caregiver. Therefore, while his girlfriend (and mother of his children) works endless hours in the low-wage economy, at night, Earl implements his bedtime routine with his sons like clockwork. As Earl puts it, “I tuck them in bed, and I read them bedtime stories.” On other occasions, when the weather is serene, Earl takes his boys to the swimming pool. While there, he treads the edge of the pool with his “baby boy” clutched in his arms, as the child is “scared” of the water.

Darius is another father who is unashamed about being emotionally expressive to son. As an unemployed single-father, Darius spends much of his time catering to his young son. For example, at night, Darius makes sure his son knows when its “time to take a bath.” Once out the bathtub, Darius makes it a priority to “fix him something to eat.” Then Darius begins the process of putting his son to sleep, which is not always a simple task. Darius’s below comments help to clarify this point:

Then, you know, we’ll have to wind down. We’ll get ready to go to sleep. He’s getting a little feisty on the sleep thang, but I might sing to him. You know? Sing him the alphabet. So, I might just, you know, pat him on the back and let him know
that everything is alright. I console him. I do a lot of consoling at night just to calm him down…

Like Darius, Greg also uses every moment at his disposal to emotionally bond with his young son. As a single-father, Greg’s bond with his son is inseparable, primarily because all they have is each other. “All he wants to do is run and be around his dad,” Greg remarks. Once upon a time, whenever Greg would “leave to go to work” his son was bound to “throw a fit.” However, things have dramatically improved:

He’s doing a lot better now. Now, I’ll say “Bye ***, give me a hug,” and he’ll say “Bye-bye, love you.” So, we have a very good relationship. I know that he loves me, and he knows that I’m his father. He wakes up in the morning and he’ll ask for me… He’s very emotional. He likes to come give me hugs and kisses, and he’ll run off and play or do whatever he was doing.

Similar to Greg’s emotional bond to his son, Julian has a strong emotional tie to his “little girl.” As Julian states:

For the most part, me and *** are best of friends. She doesn’t want to call nobody else to do anything. Its... “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy.” And we on the same page, she my baby, she my little girl. She put a smile on my face every morning. And every morning I get up and do what I got to do for her. For all my kids, but her especially ‘cause I’m here with her every day, and she needs me. It’s important for me, you know, to be in her life. Gotta be there, gotta be there all the way. So, me and *** relationship its tight.

Rarely are Black fathers, like the ones mentioned above, viewed as emotionally expressive toward their, especially in a healthy manner. Whenever media outlets disseminate stories related to the emotional warmth of Black fathers, they tend to primarily focus on unrepresentative cases (e.g., Adrian Peterson child abuse case) that cast aspersions about the entire population of Black fathers. Nevertheless, as my findings suggest, Black fathers had no problem engaging in emotional activities with their children. At times, the emotional bonds interviewed fathers cultivated with their children were facilitated through digital technology.
6.3.1.4 Spending Quality Time with Children – Technology-Centered Bonds

Over the past several decades, internet accessibility has grown at an unprecedented rate. The same can be said about the availability of mobile technology and social media. Although the digital revolution has produced mixed feelings in certain quarters, it goes without question that new technologies and social media have been instrumental in influencing parent-child interactions and parental involvement. This was surely the case with several of the interviewed fathers. Whether interviewed fathers used digital technologies to bond with their nonresident children that they desperately missed, and/or they relied on such technologies to improve the learning outcomes of their offspring.

For example, Marty has fathered five children by “three different” women. Due to being involved in conflicted co-parenting relationships with the mothers of his first two sets of children, Marty is unable to see them as often as he would like. Determined not repeat the blunders of the past, Marty is committed to bond with his youngest child in ways that he has not been able to do with his older children. However, due to Marty’s hectic work schedule, he is unable to see his son as often as he would like. In fact, Marty sees his son “probably once every couple of weeks. It’s not even once a week like it should be.” Marty continues to say:

I mean, I do get him on my off days, but sometimes I might have to work through the week. We see each other but not as often as I would like. I would like for him to be with me at least 3 or 4 times a week, every week.

Despite not being able to see his baby boy that often, in conjunction with the cooperation of his son’s mother, Marty has found a way to circumvent his dilemma. Facetime. Without this audio and video calling app, Marty would have to fewer opportunities to bond with his son. When I asked Marty “How do you communicate with your youngest child?” he had the following to say:

Well, I talk to him a lot. I’ll call over there, and I’ll let him hear my voice. I will do the FaceTime thing on the phone. That’s pretty much it because I’m not over there all the time.
Jerry is another father who has harnessed the power of digital technologies to interact with his children. A father of two girls and one boy, for Jerry, carving out time to equally bond with all of his children was a difficult balancing act, especially giving the daunting demands of single fatherhood were never-ending. Jerry, like many of the other interviewed fathers, had sole custody of at least one of his children. Jerry took it upon himself to gain full custody of his second child after coming to terms with the fact that her mother was mentally unfit to raise their child.

According to Jerry:

She has a little mental disability, and she can’t stay in one spot. She don’t want to take no medication. She be lashing out violently, know what I mean? So, uh, you know, I had to go get custody because she basically couldn’t take care of her by herself.

While Jerry gladly embraced the responsibility of single parenthood, mainly because he had ample opportunities to bond with his daughter, in other moments throughout the interview, Jerry literally wept over being unable to similarly bond with his other two kids, as they “live a million miles away.” To overcome these geographical barriers, the “internet” and “Facebook video chatting” became instrumental for Jerry. Jerry’s response to the question, “What is the best part of being a father?” highlights this point:

Being able to provide for my kids. Buy them whatever they want, so they don’t ever have to want for nothing. That’s the best part to me, and seeing them when I can, spending time with them, and the other ones, even if it’s over the internet. At least they get to see me and know who I am. So, when I do come around, they’ll know who I am…

Zion, like Jerry, uses media technologies like Facetime to overcome the physical challenges associated with him seeing his out-of-state daughter. According to Zion,

Umm... my relationship with her is definitely not what it needs to be. Um... I FaceTime her too. We see each other over the phone and stuff like that. I talk to her, but it’s nothing like having that connection and being able to see her. You know, touch her physically, hugging her, or kissing her. I had to adjust to that over time. The last 8 months has been hard. It’s hard not being able to see my daughter when I want, and I’ve been trying to convince her momma to move back down here. I’m
definitely not moving to Pittsburg but trying to convince her momma to move her back down here, so I can see my daughter. I definitely miss her. It’s nothing sending money, but you need that time with your child too. It doesn’t hurt that you send them money and they are doing good financially. But I want to spend time with my daughter too… love and affection goes a long way too, and I really miss that with my oldest child.

Zion is also using digital technologies to bond with the youngest of his 6 kids, who resides in a household dissimilar from the one Zion dwells.

I’m definitely calling. I know she can’t talk but just for her to hear me on the phone. I know she can’t talk, but she knows my voice. So, it just does something to me, knowing that she happy when she hears my voice. So, just calling and video chat; me and her momma have to FaceTime so I can see her… I try to see her when I’m not around her through FaceTime and just talking to her.

Other fathers also relied on novel digital technologies to bond with their children. Take Julian for example. It is obvious that his “little girl” has him wrapped around her finger, in a good way of course. Whenever she is out of his sight, if even for a moment, she is not out of mind.

Julian’s following remarks illustrate how video chatting apps help him to stay connected with his daughter:

I try to, like when she goes over her aunt’s house, I try to call her as much as possible. You know, talk to her over the phone. We do the video chat thing. That’s pretty much the way we stay connected when she’s not here.

In my sit-down conversation with Calvin, he also let it be known that he expects his oldest daughter to call him every day through video chatting apps. Apparently, Calvin is so adamant about her doing so because he missed out on much of her upbringing while he was imprisoned. Therefore, although they do not live in the same household with one another, they can communicate with each other at a moment’s notice, as Calvin pridefully states. According to Calvin:

Every day she calls me on Facetime. I got her an iPhone for her birthday. I got her an iPhone for her birthday. I got her an iPhone for her birthday! She Facetimes me every day. Every single day.
In other instances, fathers used social media to monitor the behavior of their nonresident children. Don was one of those fathers. See the below statement, which was culled from Don’s interview transcript:

Okay, let’s talk about the relationship you have with your oldest girl for a second. I know you touched on it earlier, but how is the relationship between you two?

Right now, it’s better than what it was. I had to tell her to call me and me telling her that if I get on your butt, your mom ain’t gone say nothing about it. And I think that really like opened up her eyes a lot more like “Yeah, that’s my daddy.” Know what I’m saying? “Like, this is who I really need to be listening to,” but other than that, we’ve been having an off and on relationship.

Alright. How often do you get a chance to spend time with her?

It really just be like whenever she ready to come over here. But other than that, I see her on the internet and stuff like that, but I really don’t be talking to her like that though.

What are some of the ways you stay connected with her? I heard you say the internet?

The internet and social media. But then again, my wife got the number too so whenever my wife sees something, she’ll tell me. Then, we’ll make the decision if we’re gone call right then and there or not. But if not, then I’ll just wait till I see her. Then when I see her, I just blast on her. Everything, everything I done seen. I just blast on her about it. But, other than that, I don’t really be seeing her how I see my other kids.

For the Black fathers utilizing technology to bond with their children, they too demonstrated how they are committed to fulfilling their parental responsibilities through unconventional means. The pejorative label of the “deadbeat” father that is routinely attached to Black fathers, again, warrants reevaluation. For interviewed fathers unable to forge meaningful physical interactions with children, they used a variety of digital technologies to transcend geographical barriers and bond with their offspring. Their commitment to their responsibilities as fathers were on full display whenever they used the “internet,” “Facebook,” “FaceTime,” or any other “video chat apps” to virtually bond with their children.
6.4 Monitoring and Protecting Children

There is a great deal of scholarship that focuses on the numerous ways in which mothers protect their children in high-violence neighborhoods. Less research is available on fathers. The dearth of studies on such an important topic is ironic, given that historically fathers have protected their children from various forms of danger (Johnson, Jr. et al. 2016). Fathers who shepherd over their children commit themselves to establishing safe environments where their offspring can abundantly prosper.

The fathers featured in this study are no different. Qualitative analysis revealed that roughly 100 percent of interviewed fathers monitored and protected their children in one of the two distinct ways: (1) by controlling their children’s social environment, and (2) through transferring values based on life lessons. The first way fathers monitored and protected their children was by controlling their social environment. Interviewed fathers relied on this particular form of monitoring and protecting their children whenever they attempted to regulate the physical or social setting in which their children operated for safety purposes. In relation to the second way that fathers monitored and protected their children, fathers extensively drew on their lived experiences to guide, advise, and direct their children toward a better life path. The ensuing paragraphs elucidate how fathers rely on these tactics to guide the development of their children and keep them alive and well in high-risk environments.

6.4.1 Controlling their Children’s Social Environment

Whenever fathers were asked “What are your primary concerns for your children?” wide-ranging answers to this question would arise. For example, since Calvin and the mother of his second set of kids broke up due to infidelity, thoughts have raged on in his head about how her new boyfriend may be mistreating his children. Calvin’s concerns for his children jump off the page in the following statement:
Yeah, I got concerns. Like, somebody might be texting my kids. The new boyfriend might be whooping my son. It ain’t even just the sexual thang. Just period. If they ain’t your kids, don’t put your hands on them. Like the new dude, I ain’t spoke to him. I ain’t talking to him. The way I talk to her about him, he should know what’s going on. If he gone trick my girlfriend to leave me alone to mess with him, and he married, I feel some type a way about that. You done messed up my household. That messed up my house. The dude she was dealing with is in the house. My son told me. You wouldn’t even believe he married. His cousins reaching out to me telling me that he married. So, you know, I got a vendetta against him about that situation. You probably pushing my son down the steps or something when you see him. You know, anything. I don’t know. I don’t know. I do have worries about that. I worry a lot about that a lot…

When asked how he (Calvin) protects his children from his concerns, Calvin had no qualms about sharing with me that he will protect his children, at all costs. As Calvin put it:

I’m an armed father. Very armed. You got a lot of folks walking ‘round with ‘em out there showing them and all that. My children know I protect them. Not just saying with weapons, but they know that I’m their protector. They call me if they need help. “Hey, call me. When they hit on you in school, call me. Teacher talking to you crazy, call me. Let me know what’s up. Call my number.”

Kendrick, like Calvin, was not all too thrilled with the fact that his second ex-wife put their children in harm’s way following their divorce. According to Kendrick, his ex-wife prioritized her drug addiction over her children. Because of this, their children would often find themselves in unsafe environments. As a result, Kendrick knew that it would be best for him to gain full custody of their children, although, the judge was not in favor of his request initially. See the below remarks for illustrative purposes, which display Kendrick’s intense ire about the whole ordeal:

I’m responsible for these kids, not her. She kind of coo-coo. He ain’t want to hear none of that. I had all my documents and had an attorney standing right there, so the attorney worked something out. We got a 50/50 deal, so I go by and pick my kids up. Man, I’d go by my own house, and pick my kids up and she got all these strangers in the mother-fucking house. I don’t know these people. They people around my kids. They in there getting high, you a junkie. I used to talk to my kids on a daily basis. “You know what a good touch and a bad touch is right? You ever feel unsafe; you know my number. Just call me and let me know. I’m supposed to protect you.” So, every time I use to go get them, we have that conversation because I don’t know these people. They’re capable of doing anything to my kids. I wanted to burn that house down. I wanted to hurt them people in that house because my kids are in this house, and they not safe. So that made me very angry, very angry. Knowing my kids are in this house and you in the room, back there getting high or
whatever the fuck you are doing. All I’m thinking is that my kids are not safe. I felt really angry and upset…

Mike is another father who values the importance of controlling the social environment of his children, especially as it pertains to his “little queen.” The following comments reflect this point:

Man, that’s my girl yo. Like, I’m overprotective about my daughter, because I have seen stuff and know stuff and know how different people are… you can’t trust too many people with your children, especially your daughter. Like, I don’t trust too many men around my daughter. Like, that’s why I try my best to try to work everything out with their mother ‘cause I don’t want to go through that experience. Like, the day my daughter tells me somebody touched me, or something like that…that’s the day I’ll go crazy. I’m very overprotective. That’s my angel. My princess. My little queen. I would do whatever for her, whatever she asks me. That’s why we have a strong bond and a strong connection.

Calvin, Kendrick, and Mike comments all highlight the immense level of anxiety and trepidation that enters their mind whenever confronted with the possibility that their children may be in an unsafe social environment. Their responses suggest that they are not only worried about their children’s safety and well-being in potentially chaotic or uncontrolled social environments, but that they are also drilling it in their kid’s minds that they should immediately alter them if anything was to go terribly awry. Such parenting practices speak to the fact that fathers, like the ones mentioned above, have developed elaborate parental schemes to help ensure their children are safe at all times. Furthermore, since the parenting practices deployed by fathers in such situations are discussion-oriented, they are also helping to build healthy lines of open communication with their children, which will hopefully last a lifetime.

Darius, already overwhelmed by the responsibilities associated with single fatherhood, is also concerned about the “identity crises” bug floating in the atmosphere. According to Darius:

It's a lot of identity crises man! As far as knowing who we are, who we meant to be and who we is. He (son) can do anything he put his mind to it. It’s already built and instilled in him. I definitely want him to be proud of his gender… I want him to be proud of his race, you know what I’m saying? I just want him to know that he already got in him… no matter whose he’s around, who he sees, I want him to have his own mind, you know what I’m saying?
When asked how he plans to protect his son from any impending “identity crises,” Darius offered the following reply:

Okay, first, I can definitely control his environment. Second of all, educate him about it. Let him be knowledgeable about it. Third of all, keep communication lines open. I’m all ears. I will hear him out. I will hear him out, any type of question. I want him to gravitate toward me. I don’t want to rule with an iron fist, you know what I mean? You know, I want to put him in a place where he wants to gravitate to the structure that I know is good for him.

For Darius, he hopes that his proactive parenting approach will help his son to identify “what’s wrong, and what’s permittable.” In doing so, he will not have “him around things that will taint his overall outlook on life.” Ultimately, Darius hopes for his son to resist the trappings of self-destruction brought on by individuals who “plant seeds” of mischief.

Joseph is another father who refuses to let is kids out of his sight. An aspiring rapper with a “CD finna launch off,” this father of five doesn’t allow his kids to “spend the night over they friend’s house.” However, his kids’ friends are more than welcome to “spend the night” at his humble abode. In an emphatic tone, Joseph declares he “ain’t with all that. I don’t like my children to go anywhere, especially my little girl! It’s going to be hard for her to go somewhere.” Joseph’s unwillingness to let his children from under his thumb has everything to do with his fear of them “being misled in life and believing that everything that people say is true.” Therefore, Joseph’s ostensible helicopter parent approach is a necessary strategy for him to employ.

Similar to Darius and Joseph, Julian is another father who firmly understands the importance of controlling the social environment of his children. Like many of the interviewed fathers, Julian has high educational aspirations for his daughter. However, under no illusion, Julian recognizes that his daughter’s academic success is not solely contingent upon the quality of her education. It also depends on a school’s ability to create an environment where students have healthy relationships with each other.
To a large degree, this is why Julian is looking to place his daughter “in the right school.” According to Julian, “the school she goes to now, the environment is so, so.” Julian’s daughter is currently attending a school in “Fulton County, in Atlanta” where it is apparently “rough” because her schoolmates are “on a different level.” After prodding Julian to better explain the difference between his daughter and her school peers, he states: “Those kids on a different level than Dekalb County kids. City kids, you know, they grow up faster. So, I’m just trying to get her out of that school.” For Julian, transferring his daughter to a better school environment will “keep her around some positive things, and teach her right from wrong.” Fathers like Darius, Joseph, and Julian take pride in steering their children away from trouble and directing them toward the pathway of prosperity. However, this can be a burdensome task for fathers raising their children in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantaged, as we will soon witness.

The thought of neighborhood violence often permeated the minds of many interviewed fathers, and their parenting behaviors were undeniably shaped by these apprehensions. Fearful of the legitimate dangers that awaited their children once they exited the household, for many fathers, their parenting practices were intended to shield their children from the various forms of violence that were unique to their neighborhoods. By employing restrictive parenting practices, fathers often limited the amount of time their children spent outside “running and playing.” Don’s parenting practices offer insight into the mental tightrope many fathers tread when deciding how best to protect their children in risky environments.

“I wouldn’t let them go outside in the neighborhood we were staying at,” Don states in a matter-of-fact tone. The “them” he is referring to are his children. Keenly aware of the rampant gun violence plaguing countless high-poverty, inner-city communities, Don makes it a priority to protect his children at all costs. When describing the noticeable differences between his current and former neighborhoods of residence, Don had this to say:
Oh man. The neighborhood we were just living in, you couldn’t be outside. You literally had to be outside with your kids ‘cause you never knew when the bullets would start flying. You never knew. The complex was on the news all the time. Franklin Park…. yeah, man… that sh*t was crazy. See, I like this area over here better than the one over there ‘cause I can send ‘em outside, and I don’t have to worry about them getting into a whole lot of trouble… We have people out there that - you know, like neighbors - that come tell us if our kid doing anything and stuff like that. And over there, you don’t have too many parents over there that will come tell you like your boy doing this, your girls doing this, know what I’m saying? But over here, we do. And I pretty much like this area, know what I’m saying? ‘Cause it’s quieter and you don’t hear too many gunshots...

Don further added:

‘Cause, like I said, this environment and these set of apartments, don’t have too much violence. Don’t have too much violence over here. They can be outside playing a lot. But in a lot of these areas in Atlanta, it’s not like that, know what I’m saying? And I done seen where kids can be outside, turn around, that kid dead, you feel me? And I done seen it! So, I just think this here a good environment though.

It is apparent that Don and his wife of “5 years” are grateful to have secured housing in a safer neighborhood. However, as Don repeatedly alludes to, the threat of violence forever lurks in the shadows of their new apartment complex. There are not “too many gunshots,” he states. There is not “too much violence,” he adds. Implicit in Don’s remarks is the fact that, while safer, his children are still enmeshed in the type of high-violence neighborhoods he has desperately sought to flee. Don knows this, and it is evident in his daily actions as a father. If Don had his way, his children would not “be around all this drug stuff.” He would rather them know about “church, school, and books.”

While Don managed to escape the perilous conditions of the Forest Cove apartment complex, other fathers were not as fortunate. Earl is one of those fathers. Earl not only resides in the Franklin Park, but he grew up there as well. Similar to Don, Earl is no stranger to the dangerous trappings of Franklin Park and harbors dreadful thoughts about his children falling victim to gun violence at the apartment complex, as was the case with his younger brother. “My brother got killed out here as a matter of fact,” Earl sorrowfully gasped. After a moment of sympathetic
silence, Earl was asked if he cared to share exactly what happened. Begrudgingly, he agreed. A
detailed accounting of what transpired on that horrific day is below:

My mama had nine kids, but when we were the youngest, and it was just five of us
outside. We used to have fun. We used to always wrestle and stuff like that. You
know, brothers and sisters are going to fight and all that. We pretty much have fun
though. We always used to do stuff. But the neighborhood that we lived in had a lot
of violence and you heard a lot of gunshots. I done seen people get shot, robbed, all
at a young age. I done seen people die in front of me. My little brother died…. I
didn't see what exactly happened, but I saw he was running when he got shot. I
guess he didn't see me. He was running at full speed. He ran right past me; I didn't
know what to expect…. He ran right past me, and I didn't think nothing, so I walked
off and then I heard somebody screaming that he got hit. I went down there and saw
him laid out and people were grieving. I couldn't really watch, I went home and had
to tell my mama. She started screaming…

Unable to free himself from the internal anguish associated with his younger brother’s untimely
demise, many of Earl’s parenting decisions are intricately connected to this traumatic childhood
experience. As Earl notes:

Sometimes I don't like taking them outside to play. I don't know what's going to
happen. Something can happen at any time. Just a couple weeks ago, a baby got shot
outside of an apartment by the senior center. All because somebody was out there
shooting at each other. I don't remember what time of day it was. I seen it on the
news, and somebody told me. My baby mama seen it on the news too. I think it was
in the daytime. The baby survived though. And that's why I don't like taking them
outside…

Billy and Melvin also share many of the concerns expressed by Don and Earl. In Billy’s
case, he “always” keeps his children “inside the house” because “there is a lot going on in Atlanta.”
Due to the “drive byes” and “flying bullets,” Billy refuses to let his children wallow in the
pleasantries of outside play. Melvin’s story is sadly similar. According to Melvin, his previous
neighborhood environment was filled with “nothing but drug dealers, crack heads, and jays [drug
addicts].” There were “always gun shootings” in Melvin’s westside community as well. To prevent
his kids from “picking up bad habits,” Melvin kept them “in the house with no friends and no kids
to play with.”
In African-American communities, neighborhood violence also tends to manifest itself through interactions with law enforcement (Johnson, Jr. et al. 2016). Keenly aware of this distinct form of neighborhood violence, a limited number of fathers straightforwardly discussed the importance of talking with their children about interacting with law enforcement, a parenting practice commonly referred to as “The Talk” (The New York Times 2015). Rodger and Jarvis are among several interviewed fathers who engaged in “The Talk” with their children.

Rodger, who is on the cusp of eclipsing the half-century mark, has five children, four of whom are boys. Rodger has lived long enough to know that the police are not always courteous to Black boys. “You hear all these things about, you know, teenage kids getting shot it the street, so I worry deeply about my two oldest being shot by cops. It’s a lot of that going on in 2015, 2016, well mainly 2015. Everything went on in 2015, so still I worry about their well-being when they are out there.” While reflecting on the recent killings of Black boys (e.g., Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, etc.), Rodger further adds:

When those cops first started killing those boys, talk to these cops! I’m not raising my boys to be less of a man, but I do want them to see tomorrow. You know what I’m saying? So, they have to conduct themselves in a proper fashion when they got a gun in their face… They out to get you, so you know, I’m very paranoid about them being out there; I do think they can pretty much hold own. They always tell me “Dad, I got this; Dad, I’m okay; Dad, this, Dad that.” I still worry, I can’t help it. Despite the things I did teach them…

Jarvis assumes the role of father for two children who are not his biologically. However, that in no way means he is not attuned to the ways law enforcement shape his parenting decisions. Between the ages of “four and five” is when he feels it is appropriate to talk with his children about interacting with law enforcement. From Jarvis’s perspective, “it’s cool” for his children “to speak to them.” However, Jarvis teaches his children to share limited information with them due to possible repercussions. For example, Jarvis states:

I tell them to say you ain't seen nothing, you ain't heard nothing… you ain't got nothing to say. You ain't seen nothing, I tell my nine-year-old, you don't know
nothing. I tell him don't be a snitch. Police want you to snitch. And those people [potential perpetrator] can come back with guns. And bullets don't have a name on it. It can be your granny, your auntie. If you're snitch, you get dealt with.

6.4.2 Imparting Wisdom Based on Life Lessons

Almost three-fourths of interviewed fathers transferred values to their children based on their life lessons. For these interviewed fathers, they felt that they took the responsibility of imparting values seriously, as many believed it to be the most vital aspect of fatherhood. The impetus behind fathers making it such a priority to instill certain values in their children grew out of their personal life failures and regrets. Fathers were determined to see their children accomplish feats they never did, especially in the area of education.

For example, Calvin often ponders over how different his life would be had he graduated from high school and enrolled in college to further pursue a career in professional football. Feeling as if he squandered an opportunity to change the trajectory of his life, Calvin refuses to allow any of his children to make a similar life mistake. The following comment illuminates this point:

The best part of being a father to me is showing somebody that’s gone really listen to me. I can show them things to do. Okay, true enough, I did get a deal when I was 15, 16. But I’ve still been through some things. So, with me being here with my kids, I can tell them and show them things that I shouldn’t have done, things that I didn’t do, and things that I wanted to do you… I wanted to graduate. I wanted to play in the NFL. I wanted to be a quarterback. I wanted to do music. I didn’t have somebody to stay on me…. I had a scholarship, and I was able to go to Florida State University. I didn’t go. But what would have happened if I had a father figure in my life. I probably would’ve made the right decision versus me being like “Okay, it’s cool to make your own decisions.” He gone help you, push you, and make sure you stay focused. Like, “Look son, don’t do it that way. Do it this way. I tried it this way, and it didn’t work.” I mean my uncle and them, they were around but not how a daddy supposed to do. So, that’s why I wanna be around mine and show them.

Calvin further expresses his educational regret at a later point in the interview, which is found below:

Now, when I reflect on it, I need my degree. I did make it to the 12th grade of high school. I only had 2 more weeks of school left. I shouldn’t have left! We went to California, stayed in California for like 4 months. But if I would’ve had a father figure in the household, staying on me, I probably would’ve gone ahead and
finished them 2 weeks. He probably would’ve postponed something and made sure I graduated. My cap and gown could be in his closet right now, and my diploma could be hanging up on the wall in his living room. But that ain’t the case. I just went out here doing music and let everybody take our money. So, that’s why I feel like any man with kids must stay in their child’s life ‘cause, in the snap of a finger, things can change for the worst.

The two above block quotes speak to the deep-seated frustration Calvin has over not finishing school because he chose to pursue a career in music. Another theme is apparent in Calvin’s comments, which is how he feels the absence of his father negatively affected him during his childhood. From Calvin’s perspective, had his father taken an active role in his life during his childhood, things would be much different for him at this stage in his life journey. As such, Calvin is deeply motivated to be a better father to his own children in ways that his father was not to him. Therefore, Calvin plans to drill into the minds of his children that they are expected to surpass his life accomplishments.

Joseph and Devin also draw on some of the unflattering aspects of their life to teach their children what not to do. For example, Joseph has big dreams for his children, and the only he sees them accomplishing them is by getting a quality education:

I’m a great man. I’m a great father. I got my own business; I do my own thang for my children. You know, I be there for them with anything. I’m in they life. You know, I got them setting goals for themselves. Their goals gonna be higher than mine. I’m not trying to go to school. I feel like I did everything I can do in that area. I’m just working on keeping everything going with my business. As long as I got my business going on, I just want to see them with a future. I’m great where I’m at. I’m content. I’m content where I’m at right now. If I die today, I’d be happy, but I want to see my children grow up to be something in life. So that’s what my job is. I’m keeping them out of trouble. Ain’t nan one of them in trouble. Ain’t nan one of them been locked up or exposed to the system... that’s the life I been through, and I know it ain’t for them. It ain’t a life for them. That’s the life I had to live. I took care of that pain for them. So, they ain’t got to go through that. So, they gonna be able to have food in their mouth and clothes on their back. So, when they grow up, when they get older, they ain’t gonna be without, and it’s very important for them not to be in the streets because it ain’t for them. They got better opportunities, and I want them to see the opportunities they have that I didn’t have when I was growing up. I want them to take full advantage of the opportunities they have in this world and get as much education as they can. I want my children to get as much education as they
possible can. I want them to go to college. I want them to have that degree that they
daddy didn’t get.

Like Joseph, Devin does not want his children following in his footsteps. When asked “what are
your primary concerns for your children?” Devin stated the following:

Not doing the sh*t I did. Like, not getting in trouble… not being part of the whole
gang situation sh*t. Not, doing drugs, not going to jail sh*t… like, just do
something with yourself. That’s all I want. I don’t care what it is, just do something,
and be your own mother f*cker…don’t be like me. Until this day I’m following
what another mother f*cker said. You feel me? ‘Cause that’s just… that’s the values
and ethics I chose to live by. So, I don’t want that for my son and daughter. I don’t
want them… you know? Just be yourself. That’s all you got to do, just be yourself,
and don’t follow nobody. Set your own trend. That’s all I want them to do, ‘cause
that’s what it was for me. I wanted to follow a trend. All my friends were doing this
sh*t, so I’m going to do it too. And that’s why I don’t want my son and daughter
having that mindset. Or like, “I got to follow a crowd and just fit in.” ‘Cause at the
end of the day it’s really up to them, ‘cause out of the 20 friends I had in high
school, sh*t, like 5 of them dead. You feel me? So sh*t, but the other 10 still live
with their pops and are doing nothing. And the other ones are probably working at
lower wage jobs. So, my 20 friends, what did we really do besides gang banging?
What else did we do? So sh*t… I tell them, “you can be great. You can be that
mother f*cker on TV and talk to the world. You could be president. You can be
somebody. You can take the opportunity that you have, even with you going to a
public school, and take advantage of them.” Cause, when I look back, there were so
many opportunities in high school that I had, I just didn’t give a f*ck about them. I
want my kids to have a whole different mindset.

Similar to Calvin, as Joseph and Devin pointed words suggest, they are living vicariously through
their children. It is imperative for the fathers’ children to get an education so that they can stay
away from the enticing trappings of the “street life.” These fathers, like the many others referenced
in this section, feel that is important for their children to take heed to their words and pay close
attention to the life lessons they are shelling out as these messages can literally save their lives.

Earl is another father who openly admits that he wants his sons’ future to shine brighter
than his gloomy past. “I have been locked up a couple of times… and I don't want my boys to ever
experience going to jail,” Earl categorically asserts. To prevent his sons from traveling down the
road of self-annihilation, he feels it is important to teach them the importance of respecting others.
According to Earl,
They are going to have to learn some type of respect. Learn how to follow rules and regulations when they get older. Because without that, they ain't gonna make it far in life. If you want to play football, you have to respect your coach. You have to follow the rules and what not. If you want to be a doctor, you still have to do certain things like follow rules. You have to respect others to make it in life. You don't have that, you ain't going to make it nowhere.

When asked why teaching his boys about respecting others is so important to him, Earl had this to say:

Because I be concerned about them going to jail... That concerns me a lot because I have a brother that is locked up. He got 12 years. He's younger than me. He got 12 years... I got a brother who is dead, and I have one in jail. So, I know how that feels. I don't want them to grow up in that lifestyle because that was my experience. I want better for them.

Interviewed fathers sincerely desired to give their children the life they never had. After looking back at their life, these men wholeheartedly believe that their lives could have turned out entirely different had they made a different set of choices. Therefore, they are determined to impart the values and life lessons to their children that they never received. For most fathers, their unyielding faith in a “higher power” made this all the more possible.

6.5 “Leaving it in God’s Hands”

In a startlingly discovery, an unanticipated theme arose from the data that lends itself to Feagin’s concept of intense reflectivity. Emerging as a distinct ethnic or cultural strength among interviewed fathers, roughly 70 percent of them drew on their religious beliefs to help them effectively cope with the hassles associated with systemic racism and various other struggles that burdened them in relation to their fatherhood experiences. In this way, the intense reflectivity that fathers engaged in took a spiritual form. Through prayer and acknowledging God’s presence, interviewed fathers relied on spirituality and religiosity to gain a sense of personal control, lower their anxiety levels, and focus their energy on finding solutions to the vexing personal, familial, and societal problems that wreaked havoc in their life.
For example, Alvin is a father who struggles to secure year-round, full-time employment. When he is fortunate to find work, it is typically short term and offers low pay, if he is compensated at all. “I haven’t gotten paid yet,” Alvin confesses when discussing his off-the-books job. Admittedly, without some sort of divine intervention, the consequences of such financial insecurity could be catastrophic for Alvin’s family:

The toughest part about being a father is finances ‘cause if you don’t have the finances, you gonna have to walk away from everything. That ain’t no fun. If you can’t keep up financially, you done shattered your marriage, and it’s hard to keep your family together… If something happens to your wife, if something happens to the kids, that’s the toughest thing, knowing that you can’t help because you don’t have the finances… If my financial situation gets crazy, my marriage is shattered. You know, the only way my marriage will be saved is that God would have to intervene in that trial and tribulation…

In another example, Julian describes how his employment challenges prevent him from achieving his aspirational hopes. However, despite having his occupational dreams upended, Julian knows that if God is with him nobody can be against him. As Julian states,

For the most part, it has been challenging because for the last few years, I’ve been looking for something that I can retire on. I’m not trying to keep going back and forth with these people because as difficult as it is for me to find one, and when I find one, I’m trying to just stay there, hopefully, if that’s what God got for me. It’s been really difficult as far as maintaining the same job…

Calvin also reference’s God, albeit in a different context. While reflecting on being denied access to his children and how such denial affects his ability to instrumentally support them, Calvin turns to God and asks him to “forbid” him from ever harboring thoughts of relinquishing his paternal duties. In Calvin’s words:

…God forbid it. Not saying that I don’t want to do nothing for my kids, but I don’t see them like that. I can’t see them when me and they momma ain’t on the same page. Yeah, I’ll buy me some shoes. But if I had my son with me when I’m shopping, I’ll buy him some shoes too. I can’t do that if he’s not there with me. I can’t do that if his mom won’t let me see him…

For Alvin, Julian, and Calvin, their direct references to God are emblematic of their willingness to seek out spiritual intervention for their worldly problems. In a way, by acknowledging God’s
omnipotence, they are relying on a higher power – a divine being - to answer their prayers and intervene in their earthly affairs.

Darius is another father who always tries “to put God first” whenever confronted with a dilemma beyond his control. Having “skipped the statistics in certain areas” and being “blessed” with a “beautiful young” son are reasons for any father like Darius to be grateful. Darius’s adult life was not without adversity. Fortunately for Darius, however, his hardships were merely momentary setbacks masquerading as blessings. An injury Darius sustained in the workplace makes this point radiantly clear:

...Oh well, my positive was like I say, when I got hurt. I got hurt on the job. I didn’t know if I’d be able to use my arm again. A lot of things was being taken away that I had taken for granted. So, it definitely made me focus and be more thankful and more appreciative of things that I wasn’t appreciative for... So that was a turning point for me in a positive way. It was a negative turning point, but it turned out to be a positive. And I’m still able to use my arm now. So, I knew God hears prayers...

In another moment during my sit down with Darius, he shared his trepidations about his son potentially mimicking some of the deviant behaviors that kept him in trouble as a youngster.

However, instead of overthinking it, Darius petitions God for his divine assistance.

Being stubborn and bull headed got me in a lot of trouble as a kid. If he’s stubborn and bull headed how I was, that can be a problem ‘cause I didn’t always listen. I pray to God that I can have the type of relationship with him where he listens...

Readers may recall Don from earlier sections. Don, a father of nine children, has been the victim of rampant labor market discrimination and once was heavily involved in “street life.” In section 6.1 of this chapter, Don mentioned that he felt that his children literally saved his life by giving him a reason to live. A key aspect of Don’s statement was omitted from that section because its utility is best served here. According to Don, without God’s merciful intervention he would surely be deceased or imprisoned, both of which would leave his children without a father to raise them. I encourage readers to zero-in on the last sentence of Don’s below remarks:
S***, me personally, I don’t know what I’d be doing. Like I don’t know if I’d be locked up or dead. I don’t know, like that’s why I say like, I really changed when I had my boy, know what I’m saying? Like it really changed my whole lifestyle ‘cause I was out there running the streets and slangin’ dope, you feel me? But after I had my boy, I cut all that loose. So, like I said, I don’t know if I’d be locked up or somewhere in the ground or something. I don’t know. I just thank the Lord that I’m still here able to be a father…

Like Don, Melvin is another father who is grateful for God blessing him with his only child.

Without her, Melvin is quite certain that his life would have ended long ago. According to Melvin:

I always say I’d either be dead or locked up, bruh. Dead or locked up. Dead or locked up because I was going down that wrong path before I had her. I was just doing dumb stuff in the streets. So, I feel like God gave me that child because I was headed down the wrong road. After I had her, I just cut everything. Just stopped everything and focused on her. I started working and focusing on her. If I ain’t have her, I’d be locked up or dead. Guaranteed.

Don and Melvin are ardent believers that without God blessing them with their children, they would have continued down a path of self-destruction. Luckily for them, God stepped in to save them from themselves.

Let me circle back to Don for a brief second. Don also gave thanks to “the Lord” while expressing great pride over his children’s stellar academic performance. As Don puts it:

And, my kids, all of ‘em intelligent. All of ‘em A and B students. Like, I take nothing away from them, know what I’m saying? That’s why I try so hard to make sure I just get ‘em what they want. I got to get ‘em what they want. They don’t even want a lot. Everything they done picked out, I done got it for ‘em… And just I just thank the Lord that I am be able to provide for ‘em. ‘cause I just know a lot of parents that can’t.

Don’s above comments are suggestive of the fact that he is appreciative for everything “the Lord” has blessed him with. Whether it is saving his life or allowing him to provide for his children, Don gives all the credit to “the Lord” for allowing him to make a way out of no way. The intense reflectivity embodied in Don’s words illustrate how laying ones burdens down at God’s doorstep can be mentally transformative and spiritually rejuvenating.
Joseph was yet another father who referenced how God’s blessings rained down from heaven in the nick of time. The first significant moment in Joseph’s life when he realized God’s grace was during his adolescent years. During this period of Joseph’s life, his family was struggling to make ends meet. “We ain’t have no money or nothing in the house to eat. We were about to get be put out,” Joseph disgruntledly expressed. Joseph went on to add the following:

I had one dollar in my pocket. I was like 17… I was 17 years old. I had one dollar in my pocket. I had lost all the money we had. Rent was $800. God blessed me. I won $1200 in a dice game. I remember times I ain’t have anything. I was struggling. I had to go steal out the store to eat. We had to go steal out the store… I remember we had to steal. It was like if I don’t steal, I ain’t going to eat. It was like that for real. It was really like that back in the days.

Refusing to accept the material deprivation that plagued his childhood, Joseph found it necessary to engage in illegal activities to support himself and his family. Whenever Joseph resorted to these illicit options, as his above statement suggests, it was out of financial desperation rather than some innate desire. Nevertheless, Joseph firmly believes that the much-needed money and material goods he amassed were ordained by God, regardless if he obtained them unlawfully. In Joseph’s case, this is a classic example of how the “Father in heaven… sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5: 45).

Fast forward to Joseph’s adult life. Even in the midst of a slew of life obstacles, Joseph’s faith in God remains sacrosanct. Now a father, Joseph prides himself on keeping his children out of harm’s way, with God’s help of course. Joseph’s below statement helps to illustrate this point:

I’m keeping them out of trouble. Ain’t none of them in trouble. Ain’t none of them been locked up or exposed to the system… As long as I’m here, may God give me breath in my body to keep them safe. Amen!

“God’s hands” are also covering Milton’s children, according to him. Instead of stressing about what the potential dangers his children will face once they come of age, Milton finds solace in knowing God will protect his kids. The below statement offered by Milton drives this point home:
My primary concerns right now… I used to be concerned over how they going to be when they get older… I don't worry too much because I think that, I think that's a bad feeling to continue to worry about things not in your control. They are going to be just fine. You know what, God has a plan for them. Everything going to be just fine. As long as I am doing my part as a father and as long as the mother is doing her part. So, I think that my kids are doing just fine…

Milton went on to add:

I just need to leave it in God's hands… They are getting older, and they are growing up. I thank God that they are doing good for themselves. You know what I mean? And they know how to talk. I am trying to teach them how to tie their shoes now. Right now, my daughter is too young, so she is not going to know too much, but my son been watching me tie his shoe. And I try to teach him to tie a shoe, but my daughter she'll watch.

Countless fathers rely on their religious and spiritual values to contend with the vexing institutional and personal roadblocks they face in their daily lives. The faith that these men place in God or their spiritual creator is rarely captured in the research literature on Black men and hardly ever promulgated through mass media channels.

6.6 Conclusion Section

In closing, Chapter 6 focused on the various ways in which interviewed fathers acted “fatherly.” From abandoning “street life” to putting forth commendable efforts to connect with their children they rarely see, interviewed fathers’ paternal actions suggested that they were more than innate criminals and “deadbeat” fathers. To the contrary, their paternal beliefs and behaviors suggested the complete opposite. By accepting their full commitment as fathers, these men demonstrated that their role as parents extended beyond just providing financial support for their children. Nurturing their children and emotionally bonding with them were equally, if not more important. In all, the narratives from these men suggest that their children should be lucky to have them as fathers.
7 CONCLUSIONS

The central aim of this study was to explore how the theories of systemic racism and controlling images affected the lives of low-income, Black fathers. Additionally, this study sought to uncover the ways in which low-income, Black fathers attempted to fulfill their parenting duties in spite of the interlocking systemic oppressions they confronted. Empirical findings reveal how race, gender, and class oppression stymied progress for low-income, Black fathers in a variety of areas. Moreover, research findings suggest that the economic instability of interviewed fathers had spillover effects, whereby they were unable to provide adequate instrumental support to their families of procreation. However, instead of floundering in self-pity, the qualitative results also highlight how interviewed fathers offered invaluable non-instrumental support to their children. Everything considered, in this closing chapter, I draw conclusions from the study findings, connect these findings to existing research literature, and offer policy recommendations to ensure the upward mobility of low-income, Black fathers.

7.1 Discussion and Summary

In the case of the fathers interviewed for this study, many of them with incarceration histories were the alleged victims of labor market discrimination. Further, other fathers stated that they were denied formal sector employment because of negative perceptions about their race and gender. While there is a great deal of empirical evidence to support the assertions made by these fathers (Holzer et al. 2001; Pager 2008; Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009), it is important to note that the employer discrimination experienced by these men are merely based on their perceptions. At present, there is no way to accurately discern if employers refrained from hiring interviewed fathers based upon the justifications these men provided. Nevertheless, regardless of the reason why interviewed fathers struggled to find work, the fact still remained that they suffered from chronic and seasonal unemployment, were financially unstable, and experienced difficulties
in providing material support to their families of procreation. Additionally, whenever interviewed fathers were able to secure employment in the low-wage economy, their newfound jobs did not shield them from the burdens of economic insecurity. The unfortunate economic realities of interviewed fathers take on special meaning when interpreted through the theoretical lens of systemic racism.

According to Feagin (2014:11), unjust impoverishment, a central tenet of systemic racism theory, occurs whenever a racially marginalized group is economically exploited by elite Whites for their own personal gain. We saw this during the days of American slavery, Jim Crow, and the WWII era (Blackmon 2009; Du Bois 2009:13–28; Katzenelson 2005). Throughout these periods, wealthy White men (e.g., slave owners, lawyers, shippers, merchants, and bankers) amassed untold sums of material wealth by extracting free labor from African Americans, particularly African-American men (Browne 2007). These campaigns of racial tyranny allowed elite White men to become unjustly enriched while African Americans became unjustly impoverished. The trends of unjust enrichment and unjust impoverishment have indubitably carried over to the modern-day calamity of mass incarceration.

First, as was the case with the convict leasing system and chain gangs, the racial caste system of mass incarceration equally contributes to the unjust impoverishment of low-income, African American fathers. In fact, it was not merely the mass incarceration of low-income, African American fathers that exacerbate their societal marginalization. Mass incarceration’s perennial coconspirator, the Prison Industrial Complex (henceforth PIC), must also be implicated. The PIC is comprised of national and multinational corporations which derive lucrative profits from government-run prisons. These private companies accomplish this by leasing factories in prisons, whereby prisoners work within them for wages far below the minimum wage (Moritz-Rabson 2018).
Though not explicitly stated, interviewed fathers were most likely to have worked within these prison-style sweatshops if they served time in prison. If they did, these private companies likely exploited their labor as a way of reducing business expenditures so that their corporate profits could soar, similar to the profiteers of the plantation slave economy. Further, mass incarceration became a state-sanctioned tool used to deplete the capital resources of interviewed African American fathers who were formerly incarcerated.

From the standpoint of financial capital, whenever African American fathers spend a portion of their life languishing behind bars, as was the case with many interviewed fathers, they are unemployable. Once released from prison, many private firms claim ex-offender African-American men lack the necessary human capital skills required for post-incarceration employment and refuse to hire them (Holzer 2009; Wilson 2009:76–77). Consequently, these men are barred from rendering their services in job categories of their choosing and are funneled into segregated and discriminatory low-wage occupational sectors as a last resort (Hamilton et al. 2011). While toiling in the segregated workforce, the labor of ex-offender African-American men is further exploited by bigoted employers. For example, citing research findings from an Urban Institute study, Feagin (2014:189) indicates that “black workers today lose more than $120 billion in wages each year because of the overt and subtle employment discrimination they face, dollars that substantially remain in employers’ hands.” Moreover, men with criminal histories see their hourly wages decline by approximately 11 percent, their annual employment plummets by nine weeks, and their annual earnings drop by 40 percent (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2010). Many of these male workers are likely ex-offender African American fathers similar to the ones featured in this study.

The inability of interviewed fathers to secure living-wage, formal sector employment undermines their financial well-being and prevents them from accumulating wealth. The inability
of these men to accrue wealth negatively affects them and has adverse implications for their families as well. For example, Sykes and Maroto’s (2016:148) research found that households with an incarcerated family member were associated with a 64.3 percent reduction in asset levels and that “the disproportionate incarceration of young black men with limited education also helps explain these wealth disparities at a household level.” In a way, the hyperincarceration (Wacquant 2010) of low-income, African-American men influence wealth acquisition directly and indirectly. While mass incarceration reduces the employment prospects of formerly incarcerated African American men, it also heightens the financial burden placed on their families, ultimately constraining both parties’ ability to amass assets.

Second, a word is in order about the unjust enrichment accrued to White communities as a byproduct of the economic exploitation of African American male bodies. Though rarely discussed in mainstream media or documented within the research literature, the prison expansion of the last several decades primarily occurred in White rural communities. These prisons, which resemble slave ships on dry land (Jones 2017:147), placed the hyperincarceration of African American men and the location of prisons in White rural areas at the intersection of one another. While White rural communities economically benefit from prison expansion, incarcerated African American men, their families, and the communities from which they hail become economically handicapped. In addition, these incarcerated men’s families lose valuable income, their neighbors and communities lose contributors to civic engagement that maintain safety and order within their lived spaces and also eligible voters in local, state and national elections that determine apportioned national funding for schools and other social welfare services, local school as well as municipal city councils.

Moreover, prison expansion translates into employment opportunities and job security for White men and other residents living in rural areas (Whitfield 2008). Even for white men not living in rural communities in which private prisons, they to benefit from the hyper-incarceration of
African American men. With thousands of incarcerated, paroled and/or ex-offender African-American men missing and disqualified from the queue of potential employees, white men largely face less competition in a lower-skilled labor market becoming increasingly tight (Blank and Edwards 2019). However, the job growth and historically low unemployment rates in the United States should be viewed with skepticism (Desmond 2018).

Moving to my next point, a conversation about the unjust enrichment of White communities in relation to the hyper-incarceration of African-American men would be insufficient without exposing the puppet masters orchestrating the show: elite White men (Feagin and Ducey 2017). In Dr. King’s final address to his staff at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), he indicted the “policy-makers of white society” as the principal purveyors of “unemployment and poverty and oppression” (1972:6). Dr. King (1968:79) double-downed on this point in his final book, Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community:

Generally, we think of white supremacist views as having their origins with the unlettered, underprivileged, poorer class whites. But the social obstetricians who presided at the birth of racist views in our country were from the aristocracy: rich merchants, influential clergymen, men of medical science, historians and political scientists from some of the leading universities of the nation. With such a distinguished company of the elite working so assiduously to disseminate racist views, what was there to inspire poor, illiterate, un-skilled white farmers to think otherwise?

The elite White men wreaking havoc in the times of Dr. King are still generating mayhem in the days of now.

As it pertains to mass incarceration, elite White men like Charles and David Koch and their political cronies are largely responsible for the draconian criminal justice laws that have callously plucked African-American men from their communities and placed them in private for-profit prisons where their labor could be exploited (Temin 2017:110–11). As the founders and funders of ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council), since 1973, the Koch brothers have influenced state legislation by drafting, distributing, and facilitating the enactment of conservative policies
(Mayer 2016), many of which are in the area of criminal justice. For example, in 1995 alone, state legislatures enacted 231 ALEC bills (Temin 2017:19). Of the slew of ALEC bills passed in the mid-1990s, the most consequential of them were the “stand-your-ground,” “three-strikes,” “truth in sentencing,” and mandatory minimum laws. Additionally, it was ALEC’s 1995 Prison Industries Act that allowed for-profit prisons to exploit the labor of inmates for profitable corporate gain (Elk and Sloan 2011). Without the help of their legislative counterparts, many of ALEC’s model policies would fail to become law.

Many of the ALEC-sponsored criminal justice bills unduly targeted low-income, African-American fathers like those interviewed for this study. Since elite White men sit in key positions of power throughout the United States, they can exert considerable influence over those institutions regulating the lives of low-income, African American fathers. This was surely the case for those fathers interviewed in this study. As systemic racism theory makes patently clear, economic exploitation has always been the conduit through which African American men have been economically dominated by elite White men. As a result, the white-on-black oppression perpetrated by elite White men strips low-income, African American fathers of their economic vitality, which brings me to my next point.

Interviewed fathers, in some form or fashion, felt the pressure of trying to conform to certain dimensions of hegemonic masculinity, particularly the one that asserts that “real” men are financially sound. It was an uphill battle for interviewed fathers to align themselves with this specific benchmark of hegemonic masculinity. As referenced in the preceding chapters, interviewed fathers encountered numerous roadblocks whenever they tried to accumulate economic power. The employer-based discrimination interviewed fathers experienced, and the low-wages they often earned if employed, typically meant interviewed fathers missed hegemonic masculinity’s breadwinner mark. As a result, they struggled to instrumentally support their families of procreation, in addition to possibly other
loved ones/dependents. Hegemonic masculinity requires men to “take responsibility for their families by getting married and financially supporting their wives and children,” Collins (2004:192) writes. For interviewed fathers, financially supporting a family was an arduous undertaking since they were either denied access to financial capital via employment or only amassed meager allotments, which brings me to my next point.

The time is long overdue for a revolutionary departure from hegemonic masculinity among African American fathers. Unlike wealthy White men, African American men, and even poor White men, exert little influence over our global capitalist political economy. The inability of African American men to accrue material wealth says less about them and more about the elite white men deliberately keeping it out of their grasp. Therefore, traditional gender roles must dissipate in the minds of these men so that a refashioned fatherhood roadmap can be constructed.

Being a “good father” should not be synonymous with merely bringing home a paycheck. To the contrary, “successful fathering” requires African American men’s emotional well-being to transcend their financial well-being. Although in the United States, “men, more so than women, for example, tend to be judged by their ability to provide financially for their families,” (LaRossa 1997:22), African-American fathers need safe spaces to be vulnerable with each other (Young, Jr. 2017), so they can work towards expanding this parochial boundary of what it means to be a “good father.” It appears that many of the interviewed fathers are already triumphantly marching in that direction. Now the question becomes which public policy proposals are capable of keeping them dancing to the beat of their own drum.

7.2 Call to Action

First, as it relates to evidence-based intervention practice, the empirical findings from this study could be useful in the expansion and re-design of Responsible Fatherhood programs which initially was conceptualized as a mechanism to (1) strengthen positive father-child engagement; (2) improve
employment and economic mobility opportunities among fathers; and (3) improve healthy relationships and marriage among fathers and the mothers of their children. The current study documents that many of the fathers who participated are similar to the population of fathers who participate in fatherhood programs and have strong feelings about their current involvement in the lives of their children. While individual behavior accounts for some of their lack of involvement in the lives of their children, many of these men lived very troubled lives, from early childhood and throughout adolescence, before they even became fathers, and many continued to live troubled and traumatic lives once becoming a parent. Bouts of depression triggered by family and personal losses, substance abuse challenges, and physical health ailments, among other problems, prevented many of them from fulfilling their parental responsibilities, financial and non-financial alike.

As a result, many fathers engaged in illicit activities out of a sense of survival, which routinely resulted in periods of incarceration during childhood and adulthood. Intervention services designed to serve men with such problems are far and few between in the broader U.S. social structure. Therefore, Responsible Fatherhood Programs (RFPs) should be re-conceptualized to provide nonresident, economically disadvantaged fathers with pro-bono or low-cost legal, mental health, medical, and educational services in addition to father-child engagement activities that are routinely found in RFPs.

Second, the empirical findings from this study supports ongoing debates about the benefits of formal visitation, joint custody, or parenting time agreements for nonresident, economically disadvantaged fathers (Edin and Nelson 2013; Friend et al. 2016; Robin Dion, Zaveri, and Holcomb 2015). The social policy implications associated with helping nonresident, economically disadvantaged fathers secure formalized access to their children cannot be understated, especially given “unwed fathers are not guaranteed access to visitation with their children as provided in legal separations and divorces among married parents” (Johnson, Jr. 2001:153). Put differently, the
federal government should amend the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity
Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 to ensure never-married, nonresident fathers have lawfully
enforceable access to their children through “parenting time agreements.” In doing so, such policy
changes will potentially promote positive child outcomes as nonresident, economically
disadvantaged fathers will likely spend more time with their children. However, to ensure the
newfound time fathers spend with their children is of quality, fathers should be offered
developmentally appropriate parent education materials to help them support the healthy
development of their children.

Third, efforts should commence to get Senator Cory Booker’s Marijuana Justice Act of
2019 to the Senate floor for a hearing on the proposed legislation (Harvard Law Review 2018). The
proposed bill expunges criminal records for individuals with marijuana-related convictions, who
tend to be low-income, African American men like the fathers interviewed for this study. The
proposed bill also removes marijuana from the 1970s Controlled Substances Act - which currently
lists marijuana as a Schedule 1 illegal narcotic alongside cocaine, heroin, and LSD - thereby
allowing states to legalize the drug. The proposed bill would also withhold federal funding from
states that continue to criminalize marijuana and disproportionately prosecute low-income
individuals and minorities, again who disproportionately are low-income, African American men.
The proposed bill also establishes the Community Reinvestment Fund, thereby establishing an
annual $500 million federal grant program to reinvest in low-income and minority communities
disproportionately affected by the botched “war on drugs” campaign. It is important to note that a
portion of these annual funds is earmarked for job training services and reentry services that will
likely target low-income, African American fathers.

Fourth, efforts should be made to support the Federal Job Guarantee, which is a permanent
full employment program (Paul, Darity, and Hamilton 2018). The Federal Job Guarantee has three
central components that will help to level the playing field for fathers like the ones interviewed in this study: (1) The program permanently establishes a National Invest Employment Corps (NIEC), which will offer universal job coverage for any adult seeking employment. Thus, ensuring low-income and ex-offender African-American fathers will no longer suffer from involuntary employment. (2) The program will eliminate poverty wages, guarantee full-time work, and ensure all workers an annual wage above the poverty threshold. (3) The program will include fringe benefits and ensure health insurance is provided for full-time employees in the program. Federal politicians have introduced legislation to establish a pilot program for the Federal Jobs Guarantee. Therefore, efforts should be made to support these pieces of legislation too.

Fifth, public sociology’s reach must broaden its reach to engage non-specialist audiences. Strategically and effectively disseminating hard evidence about African American fatherhood through non-academic channels (e.g., popular television sitcoms, reality tv shows, podcasts, hip-hop music, and op-eds) could serve as a viable option for positively alerting the perception of African American fatherhood.

7.3 Study Limitations

There are several study limitations that I would like to highlight pertaining to my dissertation study. First, the self-report qualitative measure used during my face-to-face interview with fathers could have elicited socially desirable responses from the men. While common among survey respondents (see, Bornstein et al. 2015; Freeman, Schumacher, and Coffey 2015), social desirability bias also occurs in qualitative studies, whereby individuals favorably present themselves to researchers in ways that support dominant societal norms and standards. Interviewees who favorably depict themselves to researchers typically do so to guard against the social disapproval, negative self-esteem, and threatening situations potentially associated with their untainted responses.
Given fathers are now expected to be more present and helpful in the household (Taylor et al. 2011), it is not nonsensical to assume that they may misreport their level of involvement with their children. The societal pressure associated with meeting these nurturant-based parenting expectations could partially explain why reports of fathers’ childcare activities could be biased (see, Deutsch, Lozy, and Saxon 1993; LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). According to LaRossa (2012a:49), “some research indicates that men and women tend to exhibit a credit-taking bias, when it comes to childcare – that is, men will overestimate their level of involvement while women will overestimate theirs.” To settle such a dispute, conducting multiple-informant fatherhood studies could help determine the degree to which fathers are actually involved in the lives of their children (Roggman et al. 2002:23), while also providing empirical evidence as to whether the paternal investments made by fathers positively contribute to the healthy development of their children (Self-Brown et al. 2018:38–39). Therefore, as it pertains to socially desirable responding and African American fatherhood, the fathers interviewed for my dissertation could have overstated their positive parenting qualities and behaviors while deemphasizing their negative child-rearing attributes and deeds.

Second, I would have collected participant observation data in addition to relying on qualitative self-report measures to assess the father’s experiences as parents. Indeed, there are advantages associated with only relying on qualitative self-report measures when conducting research. For example, as was the case in several qualitative studies on low-income fathers, many of whom were African-American (Edin and Nelson 2013; Hamer 2001; Holcomb, Edin, Max, A. A. Young, Jr., D’Angelo, Friend, Clary, et al. 2015; Mincy et al. 2015; Pate, Jr. 2016; Young, Jr. 2004b) laced, open-ended questions allowed interviewees to respond to questions in their own words. Thus, permitting researchers to gather nuanced, contextual, and in-depth qualitative data from their subjects, which could complement the aims associated with fatherhood quantitative
studies (Roggman et al. 2002:12–13). However, my dissertation study would have also benefited from observing fathers during their interactions with their children; while they discussed pertinent childcare matters with the mothers of their offspring; after their unsuccessful attempt to secure legal employment; and throughout their time as an obligor to the child support system. Had I been fortunate to observe the fathers in my study in these settings, my dissertation study would have benefited from a more robust qualitative methodological approach and increased the likelihood that my project would have yielded more comprehensive findings.

Another study limitation is that additional bias is sure to occur considering the fathers included in my sample have participated in a parenting programs intended to increase paternal engagement (see, Rostad et al. 2017; Self-Brown et al. 2015, 2017, 2018). For example, whenever I asked fathers questions from the interview guide about their relationship with their children (e.g., describe what it is typically like when you spend time with [CHILD].), it was obvious to tell which fathers were members of the Dad2K study intervention group based on their responses. At times, often without little prompting, intervention group fathers would list the 10 Planned Activities Training skills that they learned from the Dad2K program when answering questions about father involvement. Lastly, I provided Dad2K home visiting services to several of the fathers I interviewed, which likely brought about additional desirability bias as I benefited from a 6-week relationship with them prior to the interview.
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APPENDIX

Georgia State University
Department of Health and Human Sciences
Informed Consent for Father Participants

Title: A Computer Assisted Adaptation of the SafeCare Model for Fathers

Principal Investigator: Shannon Self-Brown, Ph.D.

Sponsor: National Institutes of Health

I. Purpose:
You are invited to join a research study taking place at Georgia State University. The purpose of the study is to learn whether computers can help with delivering a home visiting program, SafeCare, to fathers. You are invited to join because you are a father or male caregiver for a child ages 2 to 5 years of age. A total of 256 participants will be asked to join this study. Participation will require 5-10 hours of your time over about 5 months.

II. Procedures:

If you decide to join, you will be assigned to one of two groups; 1) Dad2K group (parenting intervention) or 2) control group.

If you are assigned to the Dad2K group, you will be asked to do the following:

1) Participate in Dad2K services. You will be asked to take part in 6 weekly 45 - 90-minute sessions with a home visitor. He or she will teach you how to maintain a positive relationship between you and your child. The sessions will include computer-assisted training and working directly with your home visitor and your child. During these sessions, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire on the computer. The questionnaire will ask you your thoughts about the program, your home visitor, and the skills you’ve learned. Also, your home visitor will watch you with your child and will score each session. At the end of each session you will be given $10. You can earn $60 over 6 weeks.

2) Complete 3 research assessments. One session will be done before you start Dad2K services. The second will be done when you complete your services. The third will be done 3 months after you finish your services. In each assessment, a GSU researcher will come to your home. They will help you finish a 45-minute survey on a computer. The questionnaire will ask you about yourself, your feelings and attitudes, and your personal history. It will also ask about your family, your child’s behavior, and your parenting practices. The researcher will also watch you and your child interact. You will be given $50 at the end of each assessment. You can earn $150 over around 5 months.

3) Overall, you can earn a total of $210 over 5 months.
If you are assigned to the control group, you will be asked to do the following:

1) **Complete 3 research assessments.** Each time, a GSU researcher will come to your home. They will help you complete a 45-minute questionnaire on a computer. The questionnaire will ask you about yourself, your feelings and attitudes, and your personal history. It will also ask about your family, your child’s behavior, and your parenting practices. The researcher will also watch you and your child together. You will be given $50 at the end of each assessment.

2) Overall, you can earn $150 over 5 months.

III. **Risks:**

The risks to being in this study are very low. The main risk is loss of privacy with regard to your survey responses. The GSU research team will take care to make sure your responses are kept private. Section VI below tells you how this will be done. Your responses will not be shared with your home visitor or any case workers. GSU researchers are required to report any child abuse or neglect to your county child protective services.

IV. **Benefits:**

Participation in this study may or may not benefit you personally. You may increase your parenting skills and the quality of your relationship with your child. Overall, we hope to gain information about using this computer assisted adaptation to the SafeCare model to help a wide range of families.

V. **Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:**

Participation in this study is up to you. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip survey questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

VI. **Confidentiality:**

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Shannon Self-Brown, Ph.D. and the research team will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP) and/or the National Institutes of Health).

We will use an identification number rather than your name on study records. The information you provide will be stored on secured network drives and will not be identified using any personal information. A list that links your name and your participant identification number will be kept locked in an office at GSU. That list will be destroyed when the study is over.
Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

VII. **Contact Persons:**

Contact Shannon Self-Brown, Ph.D. at 404-413-1283 or sselfbrown@gsu.edu if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study. You can also call if you think you have been harmed by the study. Call Susan Vogtner in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team. You can talk about questions, concerns, offer input, obtain information, or suggestions about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.

**Grady Health System Disclaimer:** We will give you emergency care if you are injured by this research. However, Grady Health System and Georgia State University have not set aside funds to pay for this care or to compensate you if a mishap occurs. If you believe you have been injured by this research, you should contact Dr. Shannon Self-Brown at (404) 413-1384.

**Grady Patient Rights:** If you are a patient receiving care from the Grady Health System and you have a question about your rights, you may contact Dr. Curtis Lewis, Senior Vice President for Medical Affairs at (404) 616-4261.

VIII. **Copy of Consent Form to Subject:**

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

IX. **Peer Recruitment**

You may be given the chance to refer up to five other people into the study. If you choose to recruit, you will be given $5 for each person you recruit. This means you could earn up to $25 for recruitment. If you were recruited by another person, they may know if you enrolled in the study. Your information and survey answers will not be released.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research, please sign below:

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Participant _________________________________  Date __________

Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent ____________________________
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Title: A Computer Assisted Adaptation of the SafeCare Model for Fathers

Principal Investigator: Shannon Self-Brown, Ph.D.

Sponsor: National Institutes of Health

I. Purpose:
You are invited to join a research study taking place at Georgia State University. The purpose of the study is to learn more about the parenting practices of fathers. You are invited to join because you are a father who has completed a computer survey for this study. A total of 35 participants will be asked to join this study. Participation will require 1-3 hours of your time for one interview session.

II. Procedures:
If you decide to join, you will be asked to complete an interview. The interview will be recorded. It will take about 1–3 hours of your time, depending on how much information you share. You will earn $25 for the interview.

III. Risks:
The risks to being in this study are very low. Some questions may cause you discomfort. If this occurs, you can skip those questions. Another risk is loss of privacy with regard to your interview responses. The GSU research team will make sure your responses are kept private. Section VI below tells you how this will be done. GSU researchers must report any suspected child abuse or neglect to your county child protective services.

IV. Benefits:
Joining this study may or may not benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain information about the parenting practices of fathers. This information will help to inform the ways in which we engage fathers in parenting programs.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:
Participation in this study is up to you. You have the right to drop out at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the level allowed by law. Shannon Self-Brown, Ph.D. and the research team will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP) and/or the National Institutes of Health).

We will use an ID number instead of your name on study records. The data you provide will be stored on secure network drives and will not be identified using any personal information. A list that links your name and your ID number will be kept locked in an office at GSU. That list will be destroyed when the study is over.

Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

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Grady Health System Disclaimer: We will give you emergency care if you are injured by this research. However, Grady Health System and Georgia State University have not set aside funds to pay for this care or to compensate you if a mishap occurs. If you believe you have been injured by this research you should contact Dr. Shannon Self-Brown at (404) 413-1384.

Grady Patient Rights: If you are a patient receiving care from the Grady Health System and you have a question about your rights, you may contact Dr. Curtis Lewis, Senior Vice President for Medical Affairs at (404) 616-4261.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject:

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research project and to be audio recorded, please sign below:

________________________________________________________________________
Participant

____________________________________________________________________________
Date
Semi-Structured, In-Depth Dad2K Interview Protocol

Personal Demographics

1. What is your name?
2. When is your birthdate?
3. What is your highest level of education completed?
   __8 _9 _10 _11 _12 _GED _Some College _A.A. Degree _B.A. Degree _Some Graduate Study _Master’s Degree _Professional Degree _Doctoral Degree _Other
4. How many children do you have?

Family of Origin

1. I’m interested in learning about your life when you were growing up.
   a. Where did you grow up? What was it like? Did you move around much?
   b. Who did you live with? Who took care of you the most (e.g., mother, mother/father, grandparent)?
   c. What is the highest level of education your caretaker completed?
      __8 _9 _10 _11 _12 _GED _Some College _A.A. Degree _B.A. Degree _Some Graduate Study _Master’s Degree _Professional Degree _Doctoral Degree _Other
   d. Tell me about the relationship between your mother and father when you were born. Were they together? What was their relationship like?
   e. How would you describe your family and your family life?

2. I’m especially interested in hearing more about your father. Tell me more about your relationship with your father when you were growing up.
   a. Was your dad around when were you growing up?

   Interviewer: Probe for the level and pattern of presence or absence of his father, reasons for absence or variation (if any).
b. In what ways was your father there for you (e.g., emotionally, financially)? How did that make you feel?

c. In what ways was he not there for you (e.g., emotionally, financially)? How did that make you feel?

d. What about your father and your relationship with him when you were growing up do you wish would have been different? Talk to me about that.

3. What about any other men who have been important figures in your life—for example, someone that you kind of thought of as your “father” or someone who really helped you out as you were growing up. Tell me more how this man was (these men were) like a father to you.

4. People often get their ideas about romance, marriage, and becoming a father from their parents when they are growing up. So, I’m interested in hearing what you think influenced you in this respect.

5. We have been talking a lot about your childhood. Bring me up to date. . . .

   a. What is your relationship with your father like now?
   b. How about your relationship with your mother?
   c. <If had other people that played a parental role>: And what is your relationship with <grandmother/step-parent/etc.> now?

CURRENT FAMILY NETWORK

Now I’m going to take out a piece of paper and we’re going to do something you probably haven’t done since the first grade: draw a family tree! I’m going to start by putting you in the middle and we will add on from there. You told me earlier that you have X kids. Is that right? And are all your children with the same mother?

Interviewer: Repeat questions 1-3 for each child and each mother.

1. Okay, so let’s start with your (next) youngest child. What’s the first initial of his/her name? I’ll add them right here, beneath you. How old is she/he? And his/her mom . . . what’s the first initial of her name? I’ll include her too.

2. Tell me about [CHILD’s] living situation.
   a. Who does [CHILD] live with? [If he/she lives apart from father]: About how far
away does [CHILD] live from you?

b. Does he/she live there all the time? . . . Does it vary? (e.g., depends on the week, month, season or some other circumstance?). <If yes>: Who else does she/he live with?

c. About how often do you see [CHILD]?

3. Okay, now tell me a little bit more about [CHILD’s] mother. Do you live with her/ where does she live? Are you married to her?

   a. Does she have other kids than the one(s) she has with you? Where do they live? (e.g., with their mother, with their father or someone else, out on their own?)

4. Are there any children in your life that aren’t yours by blood but you think of as yours . . . or who think of you as a father? Let’s put them in here as well. Tell me about them. [IF YES: REPEAT QUESTIONS 1–3.]

5. Is there anyone we haven’t yet talked about that you are currently in a relationship with? I’ll add him/her here.

   a. [If father currently has a partner]: Does [CURRENT PARTNER] live with you or someplace else?

   b. Does [CURRENT PARTNER] have any children? Ok, let’s add that child/ those children as well. How old are they? And do they live with [CURRENT PARTNER/you] as well? <If yes>: OK, we’ll mark them down too, next to [CURRENT PARTNER].

   c. [If applicable] Tell me a little bit about your relationship with her kid(s).

6. Let’s add anyone else that you live with right now.

FATHER INVOLVEMENT AND RELATIONSHIP WITH CHILD(REN)

Okay, now I have a much better picture of who all is in your family circle. Let’s talk more about your children, starting with what it was like to become a father.

1. Let’s start with your oldest child. Tell me the whole story from start to finish about how that child came to be.

   a. How serious would you say your relationship with the mother was prior to pregnancy? How long were you in a relationship before she became pregnant?

   b. Would you say the baby’s conception was planned, accidental, or . . . somewhere in-between (e.g., unplanned but wanted, unplanned and not wanted)?

   c. Tell me how you felt when you found out she was pregnant?
d. What was your relationship with the mother like during pregnancy? What about after the birth of your child?
e. Did you ever live with the mother of your/this child? (e.g., before or during pregnancy, or shortly after the birth). Tell me about that.
f. Were you able to witness the birth? What was that experience like? [IF NOT] Were you able to visit the baby in the hospital? What was that experience like?
g. How did you decide whose last name [CHILD] would have? Has it been legally established that you are the father? How did that make you feel?

2. [IF HAS MORE THAN ONE CHILD]: Now tell me what the experience was like when you became <YOUNGEST CHILD’s NAME> father?

_Interviewer: Repeat questions 3–5 below for each child, starting with the youngest. Rephrase questions as appropriate given the child’s age and residence._

3. How would you describe your relationship with [CHILD] now?
4. In general, how often do you and [CHILD] get together/spend time together? When was the last time you saw each other?

_Interviewer: Probe for the frequency/amount of time he spends with this child, presence or absence of a regular routine._

5. Tell me about other ways you stay connected with [CHILD] (e.g., phone/texting)?
6. What kinds of things have gotten in the way of staying connected or getting even more connected/involved? Tell me about these. How does that make you feel?

Okay, now let’s talk more about your relationship with your other kid(s) (Note: repeat Q3–6).

_Interviewer: Ask questions 7–12 for the child they are most involved with. If father has trouble identifying one child over another who meets this criterion (e.g., two kids with the same mother), they can talk about more than one child or just choose randomly._

So, I’m going to switch gears now and focus on [child/ren they are most involved with].

7. Describe what it is typically like when you spend time with [CHILD].
   a. What types of things do you usually do together (Playing, educational, etc.)? What kinds of things do you talk about?
   b. [IF LIVING WITH CHILD]: What is your typical day with [CHILD] like?
   c. [IF NOT LIVING WITH CHILD]: Where do you typically get together? (E.g., the child’s mother’s home/his own home/the home of his or her kin)?
8. Are the things you do with [CHILD] the type of stuff your parent(s)/guardian(s) did with you as a child? Explain.

9. Think back to that last time you spent time with [CHILD]. When was that? Tell me the whole story of the last time you spent some time together from start to finish.

10. What are your primary concerns for [CHILD]? Do they change as they grow older? Explain.
   
   a. Do these concerns differ depending on the age and/or gender of the child?

11. How do you protect them from your concerns?

12. If you had to name one thing that makes it hard for you to have the kind of relationship with [CHILD] that you want, what would it be? Tell me more about that.

   Interviewer: the remaining questions in this section are general. Do not ask for each child.

13. Is the place you currently live a good place for your children (who don’t live with you) to spend time with you? Tell me more about that.

   Now, I’d like you to step back a bit and talk to me about your views about fatherhood more generally and what it has meant in your life to be a father.

14. What is the best part of being a father?

15. What is the toughest part of being a father?

16. What do you think your life would be like if you hadn’t had your children? Give me some (specific) examples of how it would be different.

   RELATIONSHIP WITH MOTHER(S) OF CHILD(REN)/ CURRENT PARTNER

   Interviewer: if children have different mothers, ask respondents questions 1–6 about the mother of his youngest child first. Then ask them to compare that relationship to their relationship with the mother of their oldest child. Allow for flexibility. If, for example, the child he is most involved with is neither the youngest nor oldest, you may ask him to compare his relationship with that mother instead. Adapt language to fit relationship status and living situation.

   Now I’d like to focus on your relationship with the mother of [NAME OF YOUNGEST CHILD].
1. You told me quite a bit about [CHILD’S MOTHER] earlier when we talked about when you became a father. [IF NO LONGER TOGETHER]: Why did you break up? What happened?

2. Tell me more about your relationship with [CHILD’S MOTHER] now. What is it like?
   a. What aspects of the relationship do you think are good or are working well?
   b. What aspects are not?
   c. What do you wish were different about the relationship?
   d. What have you done over the past year to try and change things? How did that go?

3. Some moms make it hard for a dad to be involved in his child’s life, others don’t. How about for you?

4. Sometimes a mother supports a father’s involvement for a while, but then it changes. How about for you? Tell me about that.

5. Have you done anything over the past year to try to work together better on being parents? Tell me all about that.

6. What all is involved in managing your dealings and relationships with the mother(s) of your child/ren? Has that presented any challenges for you? Tell me about it.
   a. Tell me about the last time such a challenge came up. What happened? How did you cope with (i.e., resolve, navigate) that challenge?

7. [If applicable] How about your current partner? How does she feel about your kids . . . your relationship with them?

Interviewer: Redirect attention to the family network tree diagram. OK, now I have a much better understanding of your relationships with all these people that we have marked down. You’re keeping a lot of balls in the air. Thinking about how they all fit together, talk to me about what it’s been like to handle all these different relationships on a day-to-day basis.

**PERSONAL IDENTITY, STRENGTHS, AND CHALLENGES**

Okay, I’d like to focus more on you as a person, your strengths and challenges, and your views on fatherhood and what it means to be a man.

1. For starters, you are XX old, right? So, when did you first start thinking of yourself as a man and not a boy? Did something happen to make you feel or act differently? What was the difference?
2. When you think about what it means to be a man, what’s really important (e.g., what qualities come to mind)? What kind of man are you striving to be?

3. What do you think makes for a good father (e.g., good provider, discipline, role model/guide, spending quality time, open communication, love, honesty, a good partner/spouse)? These things you just talked about . . . which do you think is the most important?

4. Tell me about something you’ve done in your life that you are really proud of.

5. Ok, now let’s talk about some of the challenges you face or have faced in the past. Tell me about some of the biggest challenges or problems you have faced in your past. How about now?

**EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES**

Now, I’d like to talk more about your financial situation . . . your experiences with jobs and making money, the financial support you provide your kids, and what you have and want in terms of employment.

1. To start with, how are things going for you in terms of your current employment situation?

2. Tell me about the kinds of jobs you have had. <Intent: Get a general idea of his work history, not a detailed accounting of all the jobs he has had>

3. Have you spent much time trying to find a job? What’s that been like for you?

4. Sometimes keeping a job can be really challenging. How about for you?

5. There are jobs where people get paid with a paycheck, and there are other jobs where people get paid in cash. What about for you?

6. [IF JUGGLING MORE THAN ONE “JOB,” WHETHER FORMAL OR INFORMAL]: Tell me, how do you manage all this? Let’s start with last week. How did you manage these jobs last week? How about more generally?

7. What effect has your job (or lack of a job) had on your involvement with your children and your relationship with the mothers of your children?