

Factors Affecting Participation in Programs For Young Low-Income Fathers:

Findings from the Texas Bootstrap Project

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Executive Summary

The Bootstrap project was developed as a supplement to the existing Texas Fragile Families Initiative (TFF), a program that helped organizations around the state increase their capacity to serve young, low-income fathers. Bootstrap provided enhanced services to fathers so they could develop the necessary resources to become responsible parents who met the needs of their children. Specifically, it aimed to enhance the ability of low-income fathers to pay child support by providing them with a cash stipend to participate in job skills training. Four of the eleven TFF sites were selected to participate in the Bootstrap program: Austin, Houston-Baylor, Laredo, and San Angelo.

The Bootstrap demonstration was funded by a Section 1115 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The grant required an impact evaluation to measure Bootstrap's effectiveness so project officers at the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) contracted with the Ray Marshall Center (RMC) of the University of Texas to design and implement this research. The original evaluation plan called on RMC researchers to measure the extent to which Bootstrap services increased paternity establishment, participation in workforce services, employment and earnings, and child support payments. When the Bootstrap project encountered difficulty enrolling the number of participants needed to conduct this evaluation, the OAG asked RMC to expand its analysis to investigate reasons that this occurred.

This report addresses the research question: What are the primary factors contributing to the low enrollments in the Bootstrap program? Findings from the impact analysis will be discussed in a second report, *Economic Impacts of Workforce Services for Young, Low-Income Fathers: Findings from the Texas Bootstrap Project*, that will be available in the fall of 2004.

To investigate the probable reasons for enrollment challenges, RMC researchers conducted a review of relevant literature, discussed enrollment issues with staff from the OAG and TFF, and conducted interviews with staff members from each of the four demonstration sites.

Findings

Recruiting fathers to participate in Bootstrap was a challenge for all sites. Only the Houston-Baylor site satisfied the initial goal of 25 fathers per site, and Austin was able to reach its adjusted target. After TFF staff allowed local sites to substantially lengthen the time period for enrolling Bootstrap participants, the program was successful in meeting 77 percent of its original overall enrollment target.

The literature review indicated that enrollment challenges are common among both social services and workforce-related programs serving low-income young noncustodial fathers. Program partnerships are difficult to implement and agencies sometimes do not anticipate recruitment challenges. Furthermore young, low-income fathers face multiple personal barriers, are difficult to contact, and difficult to engage.

Analysis of this literature, interviews with program staff and review of relevant program information led RMC researchers to draw several conclusions about the slow Bootstrap enrollment rates from their research findings:

- Bootstrap’s innovative features did not mitigate known challenges as much as program designers anticipated.
- Divergent institutional cultures made coordination between partners difficult.
- Young fathers were sometimes not interested or prepared to accept program requirements.
- Expert, responsive staff can improve organizations’ capacity to assist difficult-to-serve constituents.
- The Section 1115 grant timeframe created significant barriers to conducting a novel, experimental, and constantly evolving project.

Site-specific factors (staff turnover, local partnerships) and issues related to the fathers themselves (lack of permanent address/phone number, limited education, no work experience) also affected enrollment trends.

Recommendations

Lessons learned from this demonstration should be considered when planning future programs to enhance the earning potential of young, low-income noncustodial fathers. The following recommendations are offered from the analysis of factors influencing low enrollments in Bootstrap:

Program designers should carefully review the restriction of potential funding sources.

Significant time should be reserved for planning, coalition building, and testing prior to full-scale implementation.

Best practices for recruitment should be identified and integrated into a program's design.

Programming should provide strong incentives for fathers to participate.

Workforce partners need incentives to work with difficult-to-serve populations.

Staff leadership must be flexible, adaptive, and experienced.

Innovative approaches to child support enforcement need to be explored.

In conclusion, there is still work to be done to understand how to best serve young, low-income, noncustodial fathers. Demonstration projects are an ideal tool for testing different service delivery models but must build on lessons learned from previous projects to further advance the quality of services for fathers.

I. Introduction

The obligations of noncustodial parents to provide financial support for their children are clearly articulated in U.S. law. Beginning with the 1988 Family Support Act (FSA) and continuing through the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996, Congress has strengthened the available tools for collecting child support from noncustodial parents. However, in recent years, a number of analysts have questioned whether merely strengthening child support collection tools is sufficient to increase the amount of child support paid by low-income parents.

Recently, a number of initiatives and demonstration projects have emerged both to increase participation of low-income fathers in all aspects of their children's lives and to increase the capacity of low-income fathers to pay child support. In 1998, a number of Texas charitable foundations organized and funded the Texas Fragile Families Initiative (TFF) to help community organizations, nonprofits, and health providers increase their capacity to serve young, low-income fathers. They hired the Center for Public Policy Priorities (CPPP), an Austin non-profit policy research organization, to provide technical assistance to the 11 local programs supported by these funds and to evaluate the implementation of this initiative. The program began in July 2000 and lasted through May 2003.

In August 2001 TFF decided to pursue additional funding to better support job-readiness activities for its program participants. In collaboration with the Child Support Division of the Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG), they acquired a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Child Support Enforcement (HHS) to create the Bootstrap project. Bootstrap – which aimed to increase the financial capacity of its participants to pay child support – provided parent education, job-training and cash stipends to young, low-income fathers at four TFF demonstration sites. The original project was funded for 17 months but later given a single nine-month, no-cost extension due to initial delays that prevented Bootstrap from beginning on schedule and difficulty enrolling the projected number of participants as quickly as anticipated.

The HHS grant required an impact evaluation to measure Bootstrap's effectiveness in meeting its objectives, and the OAG contracted with the Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources at the University of Texas at Austin (RMC) to conduct this work. When the Bootstrap project encountered difficulty enrolling enough participants within the grant's strict timelines to conduct such an evaluation, the OAG asked RMC to expand its analysis to examine the reasons for Bootstrap enrollment challenges. This report contains results from that analysis.

This report is divided into six sections. Section II discusses the research question addressed by this report and the methods used to answer this question. Section III summarizes relevant background information on the emergence of fatherhood issues on the public policy radar and describes the Bootstrap demonstration in more detail. A review of relevant literature is discussed in Section IV. Detailed research findings are presented in Section V. Section VI discusses the conclusions drawn from this study and offers program design recommendations.

II. Research Questions and Methods

The Section 1115 grant used to fund the Bootstrap program requires an impact evaluation to measure the demonstration's effectiveness. The original evaluation plan stated that RMC researchers would measure the extent to which Bootstrap services increased paternity establishment, participation in workforce services, employment and earnings, and child support payments. However, the project encountered difficulty in enrolling enough participants to achieve the sample size needed to answer these research questions within the initial time period allowed by the grant. As a result, the OAG suggested reducing the scope of the impact analysis and redirecting some resources to help the agency better understand why the program operators struggled to recruit and enroll participants in Bootstrap. As a result, the Bootstrap analysis plan was revised in February 2003, and the research was split into an impact analysis and process analysis. Findings from the impact analysis will be discussed in a second report, *Economic Impacts of Workforce Services for Young, Low-income fathers: Findings from the Texas Bootstrap Project*. That report will be available in the fall of 2004.

This document addresses the research question: "What are the primary factors contributing to the low enrollments in the Bootstrap program?" RMC researchers used the following qualitative methods to answer this question:

1. Reviewed available TFF process evaluation reports prepared by CPPP;
2. Interviewed CPPP staff who provided technical support to local Bootstrap sites, as well as those working on the final TFF evaluation, to get their perspective of the reasons for the low enrollments;
3. Reviewed the child support and fragile families literature from other initiatives to identify similar difficulties that have occurred in other projects;
4. Interviewed staff from all four Bootstrap demonstration sites to identify their perceptions of the reasons for low enrollments (see Appendix A for interview questions);
5. Consulted with other RMC researchers with expertise on the structure and operation of Texas workforce development programs to gain their insight as to structural reasons for low enrollments; and
6. Examined referral data from Responsible Fatherhood Management Information System (RFMIS) to look for trends.

Readers should be aware of a few research limitations associated with this study. Ideally, researchers would have interviewed low-income, young noncustodial fathers themselves to get their perspective of additional reasons for low enrollment that may not have been captured by this analysis. Budgetary limitations excluded use of this approach as an option for this study but it does remain open as a possible area for future research. The known difficulties associated with contacting and engaging this population may, nevertheless, make this process both difficult and expensive.

Some referral data from the RFMIS database is briefly discussed in this report. While this data provides some valuable insights, it is important to note that referral information was not collected through the RFMIS database until six months after the Bootstrap project began, thus excluding detailed information on early referrals to this project. This fact, combined with a lack of systematic, formal record keeping on referrals at several sites, made a thorough quantitative analysis of referral data impossible. Thus, our findings on the referral process are generalized based on RFMIS data and qualitative accounts provided by Bootstrap staff.

III. Background

This section summarizes information on the emergence of fatherhood issues into the public dialogue and the development of social service and workforce demonstration projects for fathers. The history of the Texas Fragile Families Initiative and a description of the Bootstrap project are then discussed.

A. Noncustodial Fathers and Public Policy

Fatherhood emerged as a key public policy issue in the 1980s and 1990s. The emphasis on ‘family values’ in American political discourse was, in part, responsible. After decades of evolving gender roles, sexual mores, and attitudes towards marriage there was public consensus that, amidst all the change, our society had failed to constructively redefine the role of men in modern families.

Shifting public opinion about the welfare state also played a role. The public grew disillusioned with subsidizing low-income families and felt that parents should take a more active role in providing support for their families. The Family Support Act of 1988 (FSA) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 reaffirmed and strengthened the obligations of noncustodial fathers to financially support their children and developed new methods for collecting child support from noncustodial parents who were attempting to avoid paying child support. Mothers were required to reveal fathers’ identities before they could qualify for public aid and financially penalized once on the welfare rolls for failing to cooperate with child support collection.

These changes coincided with a flood of research on child support, the impacts of fathers on children, and family formation trends. After cash welfare assistance for low-income mothers and children became time-limited under PRWORA, a number of organizations became interested in learning how to better engage low-income noncustodial fathers in work-related activities so they would be able to provide sufficient child support to help support their children once public funds were exhausted.

At the same time, fatherhood initiatives with less emphasis on child support and other financially focused objectives also emerged. Father advocates such as Ron Mincey

of the Ford Foundation emphasized the message that “fathers matter” and developed a significant body of research demonstrating the important impacts of fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives.¹ They urged policy makers to support programs that recognized fathers’ roles as nurturers and role models, not simply providers.

Numerous regional and national demonstration projects emerged around the country, including the Teen Fathers Collaboration, the Young Unwed Fathers Pilot Project, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, the Partners for Fragile Families Project, the Parents Fair Share Demonstration Project, and others. The Texas Fragile Families Initiative (TFF) and its supplementary Project Bootstrap (Bootstrap) component built on the lessons learned from these studies.

B. Texas Fragile Families Initiative and the Bootstrap Project

Staff from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health and fatherhood program consultants led the conception of the Texas Fragile Families Initiative in partnership with foundations, state agencies, and practitioners. They saw a clear need to find innovative strategies to support Texas families, as there are more than 500,000 single-mother headed households in the state.²

Embracing the collaborative model created by its predecessors, in 1998 the Hogg Foundation invited representatives from key state agencies, the Ford Foundation, the National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership, the National Fragile Families demonstration, state representatives, social services practitioners, and consultants to a stake-holder’s meeting to discuss developing a statewide fatherhood initiative. After several meetings the basic design and goals of the original demonstration were decided. Foundations pooled their resources to support demonstration sites. A TFF director was hired the same year and housed at the Center for Public Policy Priorities (CPPP) in Austin. The Hogg Foundation contracted with CPPP to act as the fiscal agent for the project. That organization also provided technical assistance to local sites and was commissioned to evaluate the operation of local TFF initiatives.

¹ See U.S. Congress. House Ways and Means Committee, Subcommittee on Human Resources, 2002.

² U.S. Census Bureau, 2004 (b).

By the fall of 2000, developing workforce programs for young fathers became one of TFF's major priorities and TFF hired a full-time Workforce Development Coordinator to create workforce programs. Nonetheless, TFF quickly realized that fathers were not always willing or able to give up the income from their current jobs to participate in workforce development activities, despite the promise of long-term financial benefits.

In April 2001, the TFF Executive Director learned about a Request for Proposals for a Section 1115 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The grant, which offered funding to state child support agencies for "demonstration activities intended to add to the knowledge, and to promote the objectives of the Child Support Enforcement Program," was viewed as a tool to bolster the workforce component of the TFF program. The Texas Office of the Attorney General (OAG) worked with the TFF director to develop the Bootstrap program design and applied for the grant.

The goal of the TFF program was to facilitate the development of community-based services for young, low-income fathers as they worked to support the emotional, physical, and financial needs of their children. As a supplement to TFF, Bootstrap was designed to provide enhanced services to these fathers so that they could earn the resources they needed to become responsible parents who met the needs of their children.³ Specifically, Bootstrap hoped to enhance the ability of low-income fathers to pay child support by providing them with a cash stipend to participate in job skills training so that they could become more successful in the workforce. An additional array of services was aimed at helping Bootstrap participants overcome barriers to becoming successful parents and workers.

As noted in Table 1, delays in executing contractual agreements between the OAG and the local Bootstrap sites caused the Bootstrap program's start date to be pushed back from January to March 2002. Additional delays prevented one of the local Bootstrap sites from signing a contract until May 2002. Program designers attributed this situation to the challenge of building a collaborative which reconciled the unique bureaucratic cultures of government and nonprofits.

³ Texas Fragile Families Initiative, 2001.

**Table 1:
Key Bootstrap Schedule Changes**

	Per August 2001 Bootstrap Proposal	Per April 2002 Evaluation Plan	Per August 2002 Request for No-Cost Extension	Per February 2003 Revised Evaluation Plan	Actual →
Enrollment Deadline Final date to enroll fathers in Bootstrap for inclusion in the impact evaluation; total length of the enrollment period (from the Bootstrap start date).	Sept. 2002 (9 mo.)	Sept. 2002 (6 mo.) *	Sept. 2002 (6 mo.)	March 2003 (12 mo.)	June 2003 (15 mo.)
Evaluation Data Collection Schedule End-date for data collection period; minimum number of months of data available for fathers enrolled at the enrollment deadline.		June 2003* (9 mo.)	Sept. 2003 (12 mo.)	Sept. 2003 (6 mo.)	Sept. 2003 (3 mo.)

* Administrative issues delayed Bootstrap's start date until March 2002.

Source: RMC analysis of contract documents

In response to these initial delays, Bootstrap administrators filed for a no-cost extension. HHS approved the extension, which expanded the total grant period by nine months, but also indicated that it would not be willing to grant any further time extensions. Continued difficulty enrolling enough participants to meet the target needed to conduct the impact evaluation ultimately led TFF staff to push the final enrollment date back to June 2003 and to reset the enrollment targets at each of the Bootstrap sites. It eventually took Bootstrap sites 15 months from the date that the first local Bootstrap contract was signed to enroll enough participants for evaluation purposes instead of the nine months anticipated in the original proposal. By the time this occurred, the available data collection period for the impact evaluation was reduced to only three months after program entry for fathers who enrolled near the June 2003 deadline.⁴

⁴ In late February 2004, the Office of Child Support Enforcement granted another no-cost extension that allowed for the restoration of a 9-month evaluation observation period after all program entry was completed.

In addition to *outcome* related metrics (increased child support payment, improved earnings), Bootstrap also encouraged sites to achieve certain *outputs* (enrollment numbers) in order to allow for the required impact analysis. RMC’s original impact research design required that each site enroll a minimum of 25 fathers in order to facilitate site-to-site comparison. When it became clear that recruiting 25 fathers per site in the limited time period would be difficult, the overall goal was adjusted to 35 fathers at Houston-Baylor and 17 each at Austin, Laredo, and San Angelo.⁵ The evaluation plan was also modified to drop its comparison of impacts for individual sites.

C. Demonstration Sites

Four of the 11 Texas Fragile Family Initiative locations were selected as Bootstrap demonstration sites. TFF staff selected the sites using informal criteria they hoped would create a broad sample, and targeted sites that were likely to be successful. They also took regional socioeconomic differences into consideration when selecting sites in order to create a more diverse pool from which to draw participants. Emphasis was also placed on selecting communities that had child support offices and one-stop workforce centers that seemed likely to support the initiative.

Austin, TX

The City of Austin, the state capital and home to the University of Texas, is situated in a growing county of over 800,000 residents.⁶ A high tech boom in the 1990s drew thousands of new residents to the area, sharply driving up property values and rental prices. While the boom brought many new jobs to the area, the recent economic downturn that began in 2000 – particularly in the high-tech sector – resulted in higher levels of unemployment and increased poverty.

The People’s Community Clinic, a sliding-scale health care provider for low-income and uninsured Austinites, administers the Tandem Prenatal and Parenting Program. They provide coordinated services in collaboration with local nonprofits

⁵ Romo, Carlos. Workforce Development Coordinator, Texas Fragile Families Initiative. Email, “Fwd: Bootstrap Extension,” to Deanna Schexnayder, February 6, 2003.

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, 2004 (a).

including the Austin Child Guidance Center, Austin Families, Any Baby Can Family Resource Center, LifeWorks, and the Resource Network.

Tandem began providing prenatal services to teen mothers in 1996. The organization received pilot grant funding in 1998 to expand the program to provide more holistic services. While Tandem was originally designed to serve mothers and fathers, the overwhelming needs of the mothers left few resources available for fathers. By one staff member's estimate, prior to TFF Tandem served 175 mothers but only five dads.

Tandem offers services to mothers 16 years old and younger, of which nearly 80 percent are Hispanic. The program provides approximately 33 percent of all prenatal care for teen mothers in the Austin area. TFF enabled Tandem to involve more fathers in their teen parent programming. Staff hoped Bootstrap would create an additional incentive for fathers interested in taking advantage of their services.

Houston, TX

Houston is the fourth most populous city in the United States, boasting a population of 1.9 million residents. The city's economy is supported by diverse industries including major ports, energy corporations, and a large biomedical research community. Thirty-seven percent of Houstonians are 24 years old or younger.⁷

The Houston Bootstrap sites were located in two Baylor Teen Clinics, free health clinics sponsored by the Baylor College of Medicine that provide services to young people less than 21 years old. The two sites – Ben Taub General Hospital and the Precinct One Cullen Community Center – were selected to maximize recruitment. Houston-Baylor anticipated that the fathers would be predominantly African American (48 percent) and Hispanic (48 percent).

Baylor College of Medicine has more than 30 years of family planning experience with adolescents. While early programs focused on young women, the clinics later adopted a more holistic approach, viewing services for men as a way to be more effective in preventing teen pregnancies. The Baylor Fatherhood Initiative serves fathers 15 to 25 and provides peer support groups, case management, parenting education, job placement

⁷ City of Houston, 2004.

and training assistance, health education, parent/child activities, assistance establishing paternity and setting up child support, and referrals for legal assistance and counseling.

Houston-Baylor's program enjoyed management by researchers with extensive experience in fatherhood issues. They agreed to participate in TFF and Bootstrap because they felt the mission of these projects was complementary to their own and that additional funding would help them expand services and create more incentives for young fathers.

Laredo, TX

Situated on the U.S.–Mexico border, Laredo is the second-fastest growing city in the United States.⁸ Demographers estimate that Nuevo Laredo, the city's sister-city across the border, is expanding by 10,000 residents per month. Laredo's location along the Interstate Highway 35 corridor has made it the principal port of entry into Mexico. Nearly 95 percent of Laredo residents are Hispanic and 39 percent are less than 15 years old.⁹

Buckner Children and Family Services is a division of a multi-service agency providing services to families statewide. Buckner's Laredo site ran a Healthy Families motherhood program from 1998 until 2002. The faith-based organization felt that TFF and Bootstrap would complement this program.

San Angelo, TX

A small West Texas city, San Angelo has nearly 88,500 residents, 39 percent of whom are less than 25 years old.¹⁰ Home to Goodfellow Air Force Base and Angelo State University, the city serves as the trade and services center for a thirteen-county rural area.

Healthy Families San Angelo (HFSA) is a home-based family support program “designed to promote healthy child development and enhance family functioning in overburdened families of newborns.” A nonprofit organization associated with Healthy

⁸ City of Laredo, 2004.

⁹ Texas Fragile Families Initiative, 2003 (a).

¹⁰ San Angelo Chamber of Commerce, 2004.

Families America, HFSA was founded in 1992 and expanded services to include fathers in 1994. The program, known as “Dads Make a Difference,” has three goals:¹¹

- To promote positive father-child and mother-child interaction;
- To promote healthy child development; and
- To promote responsible and cooperative fatherhood/motherhood and enhance family functioning regardless of parents’ living situation by:
 - Strengthening relationships, problem solving, and life-coping skills;
 - Enhancing fathers and mothers capacity to provide family financial support; and
 - Increasing social support systems.

HFSA was deeply involved in the development of TFF, attended the original stakeholders meetings, and even asked a few fathers that had been through their programs to travel around and recruit programs to work with Texas Fragile Families. They were pleased to be associated with TFF and used their funding to hire an additional staff member and better integrate services for fathers.

In all four sites, Bootstrap provided a monthly stipend to young fathers who participated in a job training program and TFF fatherhood programs. Program designers initially scheduled the stipends for allocation over an eight-month period (see Appendix B) but later allowed for more local discretion. Services such as mediation, assistance with child support matters and federal employment bonding for fathers with criminal records were also available.

¹¹ Healthy Families San Angelo, 2003.

IV. Literature Review

This section summarizes findings from research on local, state, and national programs serving noncustodial fathers and/or low-income young men. This review of existing literature includes research on both fatherhood programs and workforce development/job-training programs with a specific focus on recruitment, the enrollment process, and participation rates. This section begins by identifying relevant research studies within each of these topics then summarizes common findings across a number of studies that are relevant to this analysis.

A. Fatherhood Programs

Launched in 1994, the Parents' Fair Share (PFS) program was a seven-site demonstration with activities designed to 1) increase the employment and earnings of low-income noncustodial parents of children receiving welfare; (2) increase child support payments; and (3) support and improve parenting behavior.¹² Like Bootstrap, PFS primarily relied on referrals from outside agencies. All sites initially struggled with enrollment goals, principally due to difficulties identifying and contacting potential participants, convincing them to appear in court, and finding parents who met the eligibility criteria.¹³

Parents' Fair Share shared many common goals with Bootstrap (increased earnings, child support payments, and parental involvement) and utilized many of the same strategies including employment and training services, mediation, and child support incentives during the participation period. Like Bootstrap, PFS targeted underemployed or unemployed noncustodial fathers but differed in its focus on fathers who owed child support and had children receiving welfare. Parents' Fair Share fathers were also much older than those enrolled in TFF. While Bootstrap fathers were (with a few exceptions) 17–25, the average age of PFS fathers was 31.¹⁴

Some fatherhood literature that does not specifically address participation issues informs this research as well. Parke examined data from the Fragile Families and Child

¹² U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2003.

¹³ Knox and Miller, 2001.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Wellbeing Study (FFCWB) and the Time, Love, Cash, Caring, and Children Study (TLC3), providing data on the common characteristics of young unmarried fathers.¹⁵

The FFCWB study is the first national study tracking parents from 20 U.S. cities, examining their relationships, and measuring the wellbeing of their children. The parents are typically in their twenties and 3,712 of the 5,000 children tracked by the study were born to unmarried parents. The TLC3 project conducted an ethnographic study of a subsample of families from the FFCWB program.

Mincy et al. used data from the FFCWB program to specifically examine a predominantly African-American Louisiana cohort for the state of Louisiana.¹⁶ Their research provides further insight into characteristics of unmarried fathers and provides some clues as to the types of social services and workforce programs to which fathers are most likely to respond. Mothers and fathers alike cited services that help fathers find a job or secure better pay as their highest priority.

B. Workforce Development Programs

Workforce development services are available to noncustodial fathers and low-income young men through a variety of sources. However, the only workforce program that has ever specifically targeted noncustodial fathers has been the Welfare-to-Work grants (WtW) that the U.S. Department of Labor offered to states and other applicants in 1998 and 1999. Most formal workforce programs do not have a reliable means for tracking whether or not the young men that they serve are also fathers. Thus, only a small amount of literature has focused on workforce program participation patterns for the populations relevant to this study.

Authorized under the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, the Welfare-to-Work (WtW) program provided funds for employment, training, and support services to noncustodial parents and difficult-to-serve welfare recipients. Two reports from the WtW literature provide relevant insights into participation patterns by noncustodial fathers.

¹⁵ Parke, 2004.

¹⁶ Mincy et al., 2004.

Fender, Hershey, and Nightingale conducted in-depth process studies of 11 WtW grantee sites.¹⁷ They reported, “One of the more frustrating challenges that WtW programs have faced is the difficulty identifying and reaching the target population.” Martinson, Trutko, and Strong’s analysis of the same sites provides additional detail and offers specific examples of recruitment, enrollment, and retention challenges from several case studies.¹⁸ Both reports found that sites achieved some level of success by engaging in creative strategies to recruit participants including:

- Direct marketing (media campaigns on radio and television;
- Neighborhood canvassing and use of fliers, community outreach, etc.);
- Market research (surveys, feedback questionnaires, focus groups, etc.);
- Aggressive referral strategies; and
- Accelerated participation (immediately placing fathers in activities to avoid attrition during the lag time between program cycles).

RMC researchers previously examined a Texas program that referred noncustodial fathers to workforce services as a means to increase child support collections.¹⁹ In contrast to the other studies included in this literature review, this project had ample referrals to services yet still failed to enroll the expected number of participants in program activities. Just over seven percent of referred fathers actually participated in workforce services. The study did not explore the reasons for low enrollments.

C. Common Themes

Across this diverse collection of studies, a number of common themes emerged:

- Programs working with noncustodial fathers often struggle to meet initial enrollment goals.²⁰

¹⁷ Fender, Hershey, and Nightingale, 2000.

¹⁸ Martinson, Trutko, and Strong, 2000.

¹⁹ O’Shea et al., 2001.

²⁰ Knox and Miller, 2001; Fender, Hershey, and Nightingale, 2000; Martinson, Trutko, and Strong, 2001.

- Complex eligibility guidelines are a barrier to enrollments.²¹ Overly strict guidelines that continually turn potential clients away can cause programs to lose credibility with referring agencies.²² Complex guidelines may also make it difficult to obtain the necessary data to determine eligibility.²³
- Program partners sometimes have conflicting goals, different institutional cultures, and difficulty effectively communicating with one another.²⁴
- Fathers are difficult to contact. Low-income young men move often, may not have a telephone or address where they can reliably be contacted, and have few or no connections with workforce and social services agencies.²⁵
- Fathers often face a variety of personal challenges that prevent them from becoming engaged in programs and/or make them difficult-to-serve.²⁶ These barriers include little or no work experience, limited education, substance or alcohol abuse, lack of transportation, physical and mental health issues, and contact with the criminal justice system.²⁷
- Many fathers avoid involvement with the formal child support system.²⁸ Most of these fathers prefer to provide informal supports such as food, clothing, or cash assistance.²⁹ Child support is commonly viewed as punitive and unfair; some communities mistakenly view child support enforcement as an extension of the criminal justice system.³⁰
- Most fathers identified quickly obtaining a well-paying job as their primary goal.³¹
- Programs do not anticipate recruitment challenges.³² Poorly designed recruitment strategies can be costly and have a negative impact on activities such as peer support groups and job clubs which, in turn, can further complicate recruitment by giving a program a bad reputation.³³

²¹ Fender, Hershey, and Nightingale, 2000.

²² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001.

²³ Martinson, Trutko, and Strong, 2001.

²⁴ Knox and Miller, 2001; TFFI, 2002b; O'Shea et al., 2001.

²⁵ Martinson, Trutko, and Strong, 2001; Parke, 2004; Sorensen, 1997; Doolittle and Lynn, 1998; Pearson et al., 2000.

²⁶ Fender, Hershey, and Nightingale, 2000;

²⁷ Mincy et al., 2004; Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, 2003; Weinman, Smith, and Buzi, 2002; Reichart, 1999; Sorensen and Zibman, Sept 2001.

²⁸ Fender, Hershey, and Nightingale, 2000; Martinson, Trutko, and Strong, 2001.

²⁹ Knox and Miller, 2001.

³⁰ Doolittle and Lynn, 1998; Reichart, 1999.

³¹ Martinson, Trutko, and Strong, 2001; TFFI, 2002b; Mincy et al., 2004.

³² Martinson, Trutko, and Strong, 2001.

³³ Knox and Miller, 2001; Martinson, Trutko, and Strong, 2001.

- Programs often rely too heavily on passive recruitment strategies, especially referrals from outside agencies. Staff at these agencies reported referring clients to familiar programs out of habit and acknowledged being too overburdened with core job responsibilities to dedicate much energy to referrals.³⁴
- Promising recruiting strategies include direct marketing, market research, home visits, word-of-mouth, and canvassing.³⁵ Programs that immediately engaged fathers in job search or orientation activities significantly reduced attrition during the wait period before formal programming began.³⁶

³⁴ Fender, Hershey, and Nightingale, 2000; Pearson et al., 2000.

³⁵ Fender, Hershey, and Nightingale, 2000; Martinson, Trutko, and Strong, 2001; Pearson et al., 2000; Knox and Miller, 2001.

³⁶ Fender, Hershey, and Nightingale, 2000.

V. Research Findings

This section discusses the primary factors that contributed to Bootstrap enrollment challenges. Ray Marshall Center researchers synthesized these findings based on evidence from the literature review, interviews with Bootstrap staff, analysis of RFMIS data, and discussions with workforce program researchers.

Section A describes Bootstrap referral and enrollment patterns to establish the context for these findings. Section B notes some of the challenges of serving this specific population. In Section C we identify elements of the Bootstrap program design that reportedly had a negative impact on enrollments. Section D discusses implementation issues, and the final section reviews site specific and miscellaneous other issues that reportedly contributed to low enrollments.

A. Referral and Enrollment Patterns

Bootstrap experienced difficulty finding and enrolling eligible participants in the allotted time period. Although only one of four Bootstrap programs successfully attained the initial target of 25 enrollees per site, two of four sites (Austin and Houston-Baylor) successfully met modified goals by the end of the program. Nonetheless, slower-than-anticipated enrollment rates required multiple time extensions and modifications to both the program structure and the impact evaluation design. The enrollment period was originally slated to last nine months (January through September 2002) but actually spanned a 15-month period from the official Bootstrap start date (March 2002–June 2003).

The Texas Fragile Families Initiative, from which Bootstrap sites were selected, experienced similar recruitment challenges during the program's first year. Table 2, derived from the TFF Year One Report, demonstrates that delayed start dates only partially account for the shortcomings in enrollments at some sites.³⁷ Sites that met less than 90 percent of their enrollment goals are highlighted.

³⁷ Texas Fragile Families Initiative, 2001.

Recruitment and Referrals

Bootstrap program designers initially anticipated that about half of the 25 participants expected to enroll at each site could be drawn from the existing TFF population.³⁸ By August of 2002 it was clear to program designers that this expectation was overly optimistic. Individual sites continued to recruit TFF participants but increased their efforts to create relationships with local agencies and community organizations to recruit additional participants:

Site	Start Date	Actual Participants	Projected Participants	% Goal
Bootstrap Sites:				
Austin	07/00	22	40	55%
Houston-Baylor	08/00	50	80	63%
Laredo*	08/01	N/A	40	N/A
San Angelo	07/00	72	75	96%
Other Sites:				
Chicano Family Center	07/00	32	60	53%
Dallas	09/00	46	50	92%
Huntsville	08/00	42	40	105%
Lufkin	01/01	16	45	36%
San Antonio	10/00	31	30	103%
Waco	07/00	32	30	107%
Spring	11/00	17	25	68%
El Paso	05/01	5	N/A	N/A
Total		365	515	71%

Program did not begin during 1st year of demonstration.
Source: TFF Year One Report, 2002b.

- Austin had about 20 referrals from the Office of the Attorney General but only one or two of these dads enrolled, often because they did not meet the Bootstrap eligibility requirements. According to one staff member, about half of ‘successful’ fathers were referred by Austin Urban Youth Corps. The remaining clients were referred within LifeWorks (the agency that housed Bootstrap workforce development staff in Austin) or by friends and family who found out about the program from LifeWorks customers. In all, Austin enrolled 18 participants (72 percent of initial target).
- Laredo staff estimated that far less than half of fathers referred to Bootstrap enrolled. They received referrals from a variety of sources including the local child support office, workforce centers, Communities in Schools, and Habitat for Humanity. Buckner Children and Family Services’ participation in two local professional groups

³⁸ Rogers, Will, 2002.

– the Webb County Children’s Coalition and Webb County Community Coalition – helped them create a network that led to a few referrals and numerous resources for the dads their program served. Overall, Laredo had about 30 referrals to its Bootstrap program and enrolled a total of 12 (48 percent of initial target). Laredo did not achieve its adjusted goal of 17 enrollees.

- The Baylor Teen Health Clinics in Houston found that few of the fathers they served were eligible for Bootstrap. Of 77 referrals, 24 came from Baylor Teen Health Clinics, 14 were peer referrals from Bootstrap participants, 11 from the child support courts, nine from the OAG, three from WorkSource, and 16 from various local community organizations. From these referrals Houston-Baylor was able to recruit 32 fathers to participate (128 percent of initial target).
- San Angelo used a previously established systematic enrollment process to select local families to participate in their programming. As such, they do not traditionally accept referrals but reserved space in their Bootstrap program for referrals from the local child support office, two of whom enrolled. In total, 15 fathers enrolled in San Angelo’s program (60 percent of initial target). San Angelo did not achieve its adjusted goal of 17 enrollees.

Table 3 shows the number and share of fathers who were referred to Bootstrap and whether or not they participated in Bootstrap, as measured by the RFMIS database. However, because this database was not operational until six months after Bootstrap began, some of the early referrals to this program may not be captured in this data source.

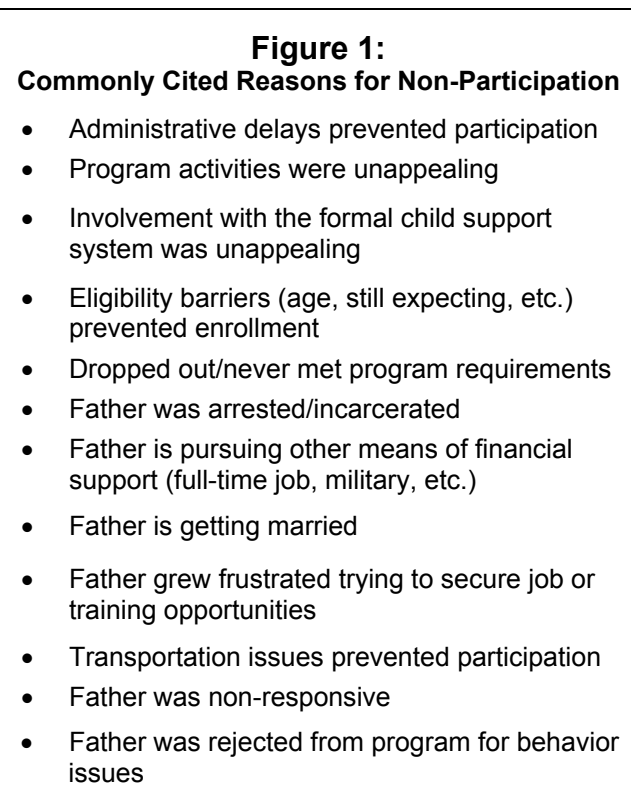
	Referrals	# Participated	%	# Never Participated	%
Austin	44	18	41%	24	55%
Houston-Baylor	77	32	42%	40	52%
Laredo	30	12	40%	17	57%
San Angelo	N/A	18	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: RMC analysis of RFMIS data

Overall, by extending the length of the enrollment period and adjusting its site-specific goals, Bootstrap was able to reach 77 percent of its original enrollment target. All four sites emphasized that the Bootstrap program was a worthwhile endeavor. Nonetheless, they also pointed out that several aspects of the program could have been improved to better recruit and serve the needs of young, low-income fathers.

Recorded Reasons for Non-Participation

RMC researchers analyzed data from the RFMIS system to determine the most common reasons that referred fathers chose not to participate in Bootstrap programs.



Source: RMC analysis of RFMIS data.

Participating fathers were defined as those who received a stipend payment at any point during the Bootstrap program. Each of the fathers who did not receive a stipend was asked to identify his primary reason for not participating in Bootstrap, which was subsequently recorded in the database.

Unfortunately, the RFMIS data was not useful for this analysis except to suggest probable reasons for non-participation (see Figure 1). In addition to the problem of early referrals who were not tracked in the database, only 70 percent of referral

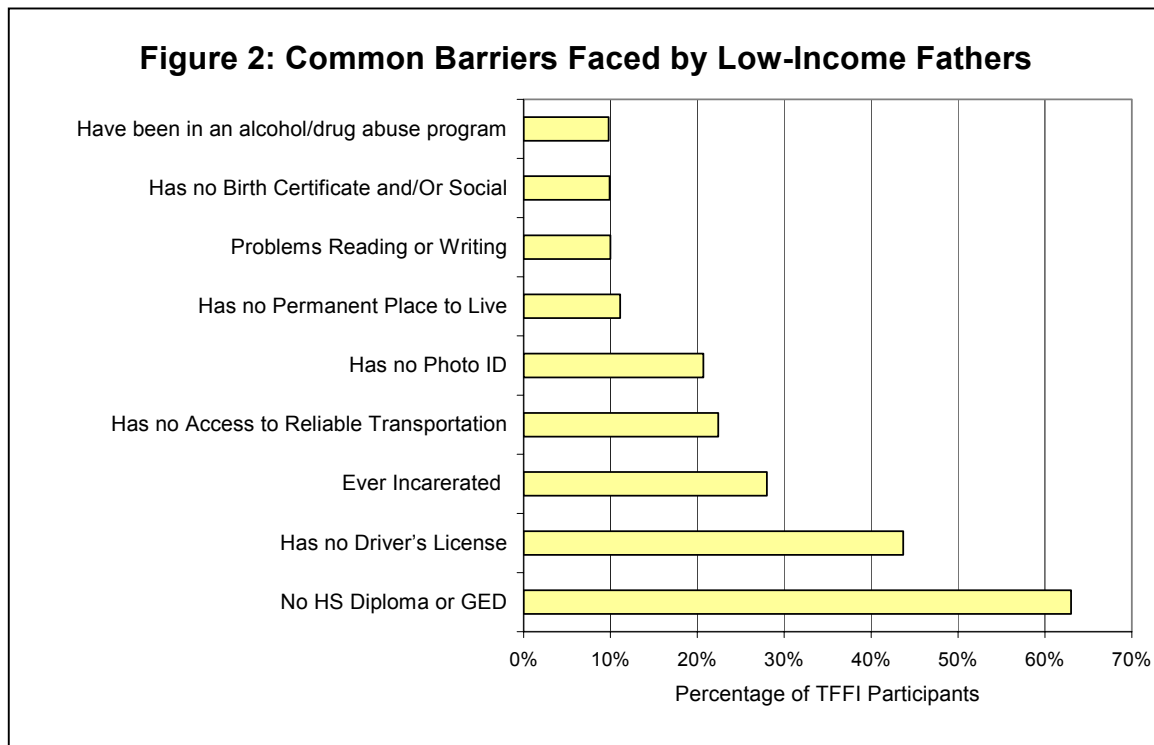
records in RFMIS listed any reason for nonparticipation whatsoever. Additionally, sites did not have uniform definitions for the nonparticipation reasons. Interviews suggested that different sites interpreted the definitions of reasons differently.

While these data provide us with some insight as to the reasons for non-participation, they are clearly incomplete. The qualitative data discussed in the following

sections support and expand upon the analysis of the RFMIS data to paint a clearer picture of the challenges associated with enrolling fathers in the Bootstrap program.

B. Issues Related to Population Characteristics

As indicated both in the literature review and the analysis of RFMIS data, young low-income fathers face many barriers. Some of these issues are clearly beyond the control of agencies that serve young fathers, while others demand creative responses that improve program structures to respond to these challenges. CPPP’s evaluation of the TFF program demonstrates some of the personal issues common to the larger TFF population (see Figure 2). Common barriers include limited education, lack of proper identification, experience in the criminal justice system, and insufficient access to reliable transportation.

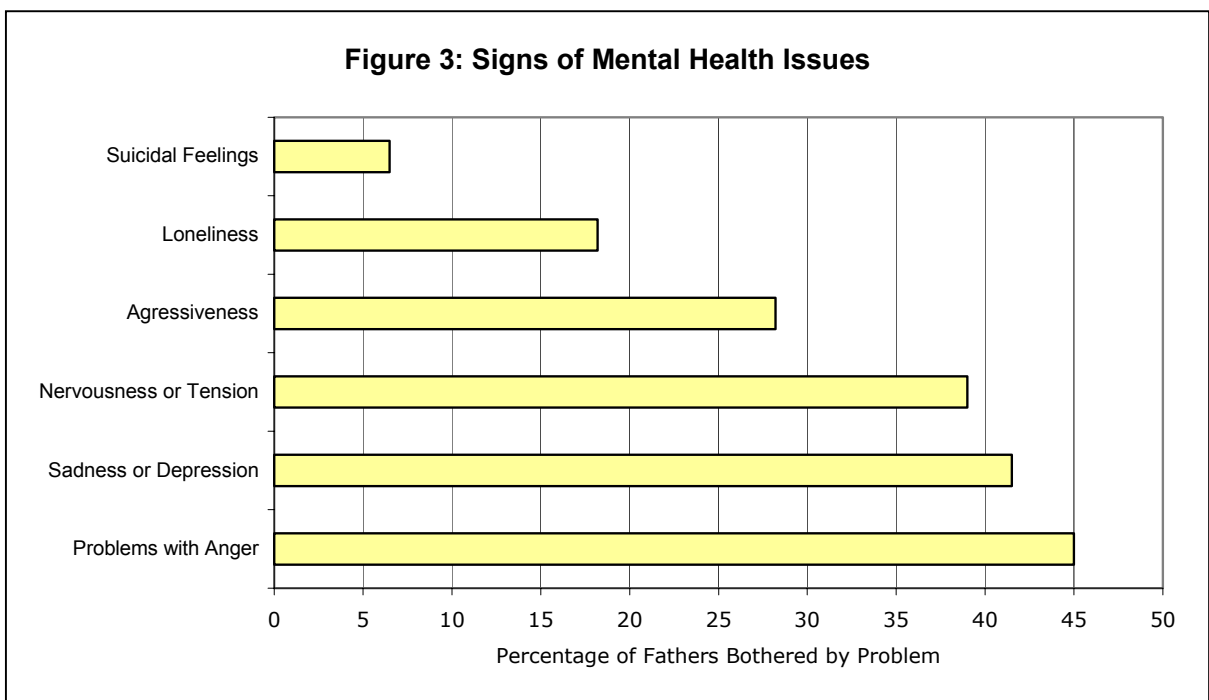


Source: Texas Fragile Families Initiative, 2003 (b)

Low-income fathers are not only difficult-to-serve, they are also unlikely to seek out social services. Among TFF fathers, very few reported receiving supportive services

such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (5 percent) or food stamps (8 percent).³⁹

Increasing evidence indicates that mental health issues create an additional barrier for young fathers. Bootstrap sites reported that some fathers exhibited symptoms of anxiety or depression. The Houston-Baylor site conducted a survey of sample TFF fathers as a part of a larger national study focusing on mental health and young men. Their findings indicate that mental health issues create significant barriers for young fathers (see Figure 3).



Source: Texas Fragile Families Initiative, 2003 (b)

Local Bootstrap program staff often cited difficulty obtaining and maintaining contact with potential participants as a key impediment to working with young fathers. Analysis of the larger TFF population indicated that fully 10.9 percent of fathers had no permanent place to live.⁴⁰ Most sites relied upon phone calls to follow up on referrals but often found their contact information was out of date or they had difficulty getting in

³⁹ Texas Fragile Families Initiative, 2004, p.9.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p. 10.

touch with young fathers.⁴¹ Laredo specifically found that many of the referrals that they received from the child support office were incomplete (lacked phone numbers, etc.). The Laredo and San Angelo sites both made home, work, and/or school visits to fathers that they felt helped recruit more participants.

Bootstrap program designers were cognizant of these issues from day one. Bootstrap was designed to try to help young fathers move beyond these barriers into employment and responsible fatherhood.

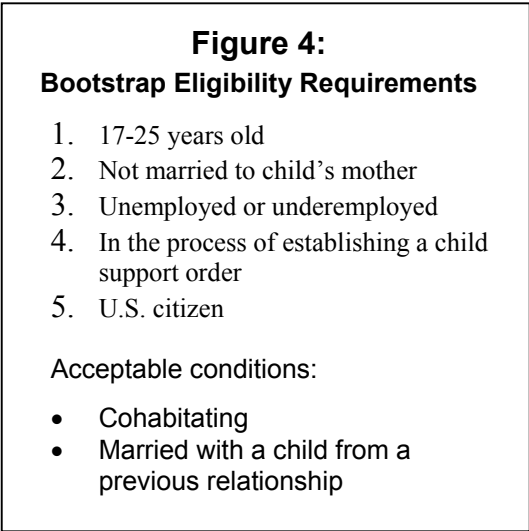
C. Program Design Factors Affecting Low Enrollments

Program design is key to the smooth and effective operation of demonstration projects. Several elements of the Bootstrap program’s design reportedly contributed to the low enrollment rates:

Eligibility Criteria Excluded Some Possible Participants

Staff at the sites felt that the eligibility criteria selected for the Bootstrap program limited the number of fathers who could participate. As previously mentioned, the original enrollment goals were set with the expectation that approximately half of the 25 anticipated participants at each site would be TFF fathers placed in the Bootstrap program within two months of Bootstrap’s implementation. However, all sites reported that far fewer TFF clients qualified for Bootstrap than they originally anticipated.

Several eligibility requirements (shown in Figure 4) created potential mismatches for the TFF population. While the target age groups for TFF (16–25) and Bootstrap (17–25) were similar, the age



Source: Romo, Carlos.

⁴¹ Out-of-date contact information is also a problem for agencies working with low-income women due to the mobility of many low-income individuals who are unable to sustain regular housing. However, because a greater array of social services are provided for women and children, agencies have more opportunities for updating their addresses than is true for low-income males.

range for TFF-enrolled fathers was 12 to 41, leaving some TFF fathers ineligible based on age criteria.⁴² More than 37 percent of TFF fathers were still in high school at intake.⁴³ Since attending traditional high school classes was not an acceptable workforce activity, it seems unlikely that sites would have advised these fathers to join the Bootstrap program. Furthermore, almost 30 percent of TFF fathers had partners who were pregnant and thus weren't eligible for Bootstrap services until after the child was born.⁴⁴ Finally, as we will discuss later, the child support requirements were a deterrent for some fathers who otherwise qualified.

While every site found some fathers that qualified for Bootstrap among its TFF clients, the additional eligibility requirements of Bootstrap often forced sites to adopt new recruiting strategies. In Austin, for example, the TFF program relied on referrals from the Tandem program for young mothers. Because the demand for pre-natal services is high in Austin, Tandem limits its services to mothers who are 16 or less. As such, some of the fathers Tandem referred to TFF were too young to qualify for Bootstrap so Austin was forced to begin recruiting referrals from other programs in the community. Austin staff also contacted Bootstrap administrators and received permission to enroll some younger fathers when approved on a case-by-case basis.

In another situation, Laredo cited the U.S. citizenship requirement as a barrier. Buckner had two fathers who were not citizens who qualified for TFF and were otherwise qualified for Bootstrap but could not participate due to this limitation.

Bootstrap's Association with Formal Child Support System Impeded Recruitment

Cooperation with the existing child support system was an essential element of the Bootstrap program design yet that requirement impeded recruitment at most of the sites.⁴⁵ In interviews, local Bootstrap staff identified young fathers' strong desire to avoid involvement with the formal child support system as the most common reason that fathers chose not to participate in Bootstrap.

⁴² Texas Fragile Families Initiative, 2004, p.2.

⁴³ Ibid, p.6.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.3.

⁴⁵ Bootstrap required that fathers hold or open child support cases to receive the stipend.

Staff suggested several explanations for child support aversion:

- **Fathers prefer informal supports.** Most new fathers provide informal supports to their children in the form of clothes, food, diapers, and/or cash. Many of these fathers also live with the child and mother. As such, paying child support in addition to these informal supports seems unfair and is often financially impossible.
- **Fathers distrust child support.** Child support is widely viewed as a punitive extension of the law enforcement system.
- **Fathers have psychological barriers/maturity issues.** Young fathers may feel overwhelmed and incapable of navigating the child support system. Many are still learning to support themselves and are not prepared emotionally to take on the responsibility of supporting a child as well.

San Angelo's staff believed that their program was the exception to this phenomenon. Because Healthy Families San Angelo (HFSA) enjoyed a strong partnership with their local child support office, they were able to secure deferments and other arrangements that made developing a relationship with child support less overwhelming for fathers. Staff also reported that fathers' trust in HFSA alleviated some of the tension. Fathers' trust translated into a willingness to consider staff's reasoning in favor of child support and faith that HFSA would not steer fathers in the wrong direction.

The Size of Stipends Limited Their Usefulness as a Recruiting Tool

As noted in the literature review, most fathers prefer immediate employment and/or program activities that quickly lead to a higher paying job. Assuming that financial pressures were the primary motivation for this preference, Bootstrap's program designers created a stipend program to provide a means of addressing fathers' priorities and attracting them to programs they might otherwise avoid due to conflicting financial obligations.

The original schedule for payments to Bootstrap participants (see Appendix B) allowed sites to provide fathers with a \$400 per month stipend while they participated in training activities. In interviews, staff repeatedly expressed concern that the stipend was too small to provide fathers with an adequate incentive to participate. RMC researchers looked at 50th Percentile Rent Estimates from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to gain some perspective on the cost of living in each of the

Bootstrap locations.⁴⁶ As Table 4 demonstrates, most if not all of a \$400 stipend would be entirely absorbed by rent costs alone in all four locations.

Many fathers were also acting as the providers for their children and children’s mothers. A staff member from one site noted that while the stipend was often insufficient to support fathers living alone, it was sometimes helpful to the younger fathers in Bootstrap who still lived with their parents or other family members.

	Studio	1br
Austin–San Marcos, TX MSA	\$ 565	\$ 684
Houston, TX PMSA	\$ 514	\$ 578
Laredo, TX MSA	\$ 372	\$ 428
San Angelo, TX MSA	\$ 320	\$ 409

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2004.

Bootstrap’s planners originally anticipated that the \$400 stipend would supplement earnings fathers made from on-the-job training activities or part-time jobs. When on-the-job training opportunities later proved to be more difficult to locate than expected, TFF staff ultimately allowed local sites to customize payment schedules with approval from TFF. It is difficult to determine from the available data if this increased flexibility contributed to the higher enrollment rates near the end of the demonstration’s enrollment period.

Sites reported that financial concerns outweighed the value of Bootstrap incentives in other ways as well. Some fathers who already had employment preferred the safety of staying with their current employer to leaving a job for training and risking unemployment afterwards, despite the potential long-term financial benefits. Additionally, several fathers recognized that they could make more money working full-time than participating in Bootstrap, once again reinforcing a preference for immediate employment over the promise of higher earnings at a later date.

⁴⁶ Visit <http://www.huduser.org/datasets/50per.html> to access data sets.

Enrollment Goals Were Ambitious for Bootstrap's Short Time Span

Staff at local sites felt that the timeline for Bootstrap was simply too short. Sites repeatedly reported that they did not have sufficient time to fully develop internal processes, evaluate performance, and correct problems.

D. Implementation Issues Contributing to Low Enrollments

While the design of the Bootstrap program initially created some difficult barriers to recruitment, some implementation issues further compounded the enrollment challenges.

Sites Underestimated the Need for Recruitment

When sites discovered that fewer TFF fathers qualified for Bootstrap than expected, they were forced to improvise ways to recruit more fathers. Laredo and Austin had very limited experience conducting outreach to fathers. Houston-Baylor had some experience in this area but had to refine tactics to reach the specific population that was eligible for Bootstrap. San Angelo used a structured, systematic intake process that, for the most part, limited recruiting efforts to families who were a) referred by local hospitals and b) met additional Healthy Families' eligibility criteria.

The Austin, Laredo, and Houston-Baylor sites all promoted their services using fliers posted at strategic locations such as local workforce centers, child support enforcement offices, schools, and community organizations. Houston-Baylor had success in getting Bootstrap participants to refer their friends to the program via word-of-mouth. They also arranged to have an outreach table once a week at the local family court. They found this to be very successful as the fathers they encountered there were already involved with the child support system and, subsequently, more likely to be interested in Bootstrap. Austin ran a 'Dad's Room' on Friday afternoons during the Tandem prenatal clinic. Bootstrap caseworkers would sometimes spend time there so that they could informally meet and talk to potential enrollees.

No sites established a formal method to track how fathers found out about the program so it is not possible to test which of these strategies were most promising.

However, conversations with site staff suggest that verbal and personal communication methods were most effective.

Effective Communication Was a Challenge

Communication problems existed between local sites and TFF staff as well as between local Bootstrap partners in some sites. In an attempt to be flexible, TFF staff modified eligibility criteria on a case-by-case basis and changed the stipend requirements several months after the program began. Local sites perceived that these changes and others were not clearly or consistently communicated to individual sites. While they appreciated Bootstrap's willingness to be flexible, they nonetheless reported that the inconsistent standards created confusion. Alternately, TFF staff reported that policy changes were sometimes ignored or not communicated to frontline staff by program administrators at local sites.

Local communication preferences may have complicated this issue further. TFF staff at CPPP typically communicated with the group of local sites via an email listserv but local sites clearly had differing levels of technology usage and expertise. TFF staff acknowledged that they were surprised that sites did not take advantage of the listserv as a resource for collaboration and brainstorming.

Finally, the relationships between individual Bootstrap sites and their local OAG offices and/or one-stop workforce centers were often strained. TFF staff arranged meetings between some local sites and these organizations in an attempt to mitigate concerns but met with mixed success. In one case a local Bootstrap project developed a strong relationship with one local OAG site but continued to receive a chilly reaction from another office across town. Staff at local Bootstrap sites felt that the relationships with these partners were too informal and that efforts to strengthen ties occurred too late.

Staff from both TFF and the individual sites felt that poor communication arose from the different institutional cultures and program expectations found in nonprofit organizations and public agencies, as well as the groups' relative inexperience working together. All in all, Bootstrap sites felt that communication challenges weakened the referral process, made determining eligibility confusing, and complicated their attempts to create enticing opportunities for the fathers.

Arranging Job-Training Activities was Difficult

Local Bootstrap program staff also commonly mentioned difficulty in arranging job-training activities as another complication in attracting fathers to Bootstrap. The Austin and Houston-Baylor sites experienced difficulty locating appropriate job-related activities in which the fathers could enroll during the early stages of their programs, sometimes leaving referred fathers in limbo until opportunities could be identified. Some fathers eventually grew frustrated and left the program. Local staff felt that this may have been detrimental to the sites' reputation and contributed to recruitment struggles. As noted from the reviewed literature, a shortage of activities can also endanger a program's credibility with partners.

RMC's analysis of available information suggests a number of explanations for this challenge:

- **Economic Issues:** The recent economic downturn hit Texas hard. As businesses tightened their belts to adapt to the new environment, fewer funds were available for training programs, thus fewer job-training opportunities were created. Furthermore, the high unemployment rates during this period meant that fathers were competing with a larger pool of applicants for spaces in job-development programs, including many workers with more skills, experience, and education than typical Bootstrap participants.
- **Geographical Differences:** San Angelo, located in a more rural region than the other three sites, noted a severe shortage of jobs and job-related activities. Local staff expressed some frustration with Bootstrap's definition of 'appropriate' activities, noting that they felt some approved activities showed an unintentional bias toward more urban labor markets. TFF staff acknowledged this issue but noted that only the San Angelo site had access to some other resources as a recipient of WIA funds that program designers expected to mitigate this problem.
- **Logistical Issues:** Many training programs run in cycles, causing some participants to miss the deadlines for a particular cycle and wait until the next one.⁴⁷ In Austin, for example, one participant missed the deadline for the Gateway construction skills training program and was forced to wait until the next cycle of the program began the following fall. As shown in the literature, time lags between enrollment and program initiation have a negative impact on the likelihood that a father will ever participate in activities.

⁴⁷ Rogers, 2002.

- **Staff Experience:** Bootstrap site staff experience with workforce development programming varied by site. The Austin site, which changed staff halfway through the program, reported greater success when they brought in a staff member who had previous experience developing job-related activities. Divergent institutional cultures made it difficult for experienced social services providers to transfer their skills to the workforce arena.
- **Competing Interests:** Bootstrap failed to offer incentives for workforce center employees to work with noncustodial fathers. Demanding performance measures that workforce centers needed to meet may have made Bootstrap fathers – a difficult-to-serve population with limited skills, experience, and education – unattractive to some workforce professionals.
- **Staff Turnover:** Staff turnover at both workforce centers and Bootstrap sites further complicated communication between organizations. New staff members at workforce centers were not always aware of the Bootstrap program and/or the special needs of its constituency.

Caseworkers indicated that fathers were easily frustrated and intimidated by the workforce centers. In Houston-Baylor, for example, a miscommunication caused some fathers to receive the wrong services. Some sites also cited problems with centers that simply sat fathers down in front of computers to conduct independent job searches. San Angelo found that they could avoid these issues by developing a close relationship with one staff member at the local center who would sit down with the young fathers and walk them through the job-search process.

E. Site-Specific and Other Factors

Several site-specific issues also impacted participation in Bootstrap. San Angelo was unique among the sites because their Healthy Families program has its own structured, systematic intake process. With the assistance of local hospitals, staff identify, screen, and select families for the HFSA program shortly after the child's birth using the Kemp Family Stress Index. It is possible that this test may have screened out some fathers who were otherwise eligible for Bootstrap. HFSA does not accept referrals from other agencies due to practical limitations created by the small size of their staff. However, the program director reported that they made an exception to this policy for Bootstrap and that two fathers referred by the local child support office enrolled in the program.

The Austin site originally required that fathers be connected to a mother receiving services through their Tandem pre-natal program. Because of the age difference between the target populations (17–25 for males, 16 and under for females), this requirement was later deemed unrealistic and dropped. Staff turnover was also an issue for the Austin site. All three of the original support staff members – the life skills trainer and caseworkers – left the agency in late summer/early fall of 2002. As a result, a number of fathers who were referred to or enrolled in the program during that time period were left without any guidance and lost interest in Bootstrap. Many of these same fathers could not be reached when new staff members were hired and the program resumed several months later.

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

All four Bootstrap sites felt that their participation in the program was worthwhile and every person interviewed for this research recounted success stories about fathers who participated in the program. Program staff was confident that they had provided quality services to participants. The overwhelming majority of staff at local sites indicated that they would be willing to participate in a similar program again but that their experiences would reshape their approaches.

In the end, two of four sites met their adjusted enrollment goals and, overall, Bootstrap successfully enrolled 77 percent of the original target by extending the enrollment period. The enrollment challenges Bootstrap sites faced offer some important insights for future fatherhood programs.

A. Conclusions

Overall, a number of conclusions can be drawn from the research findings that help explain the reasons for slow enrollment rates in the Bootstrap project:

- Bootstrap’s innovative features did not mitigate known challenges as much as program designers anticipated.
- Divergent institutional cultures made coordination between partners difficult.
- Young fathers were sometimes not interested or prepared to accept program requirements.
- Expert, responsive staff can improve organizations’ capacity to assist difficult-to-serve constituents.
- The Section 1115 grant timeframe created significant barriers to conducting a novel, experimental, and constantly evolving project.

Bootstrap’s innovative features did not mitigate known challenges as much as program designers anticipated. Many of the factors that plagued the Bootstrap demonstration – including low-enrollment rates, child support avoidance, etc. – were already recognized as problematic in the literature. Experience with TFF reinforced the findings from the literature. The Texas Fragile Families Initiative Year One Report noted that most (7 of 12) sites took longer than expected to get programs up and running,

ranging from one month to over a year.⁴⁸ That report demonstrated that enrollment goals were difficult to achieve even under the broader TFF eligibility criteria. Bootstrap attempted to overcome these obstacles by providing fathers with the additional incentive of stipends yet still experienced slow enrollment rates. In response to continuing challenges Bootstrap was forced to readjust the target enrollment numbers at all sites, increase the flexibility of how stipends were distributed, and extend the time period for the project. The incentives provided by the Bootstrap program mitigated but did not eliminate fathers' hesitancy to participate.

Divergent institutional cultures made coordination between partners difficult. The divergent institutional cultures of the OAG, workforce centers, and local Bootstrap sites complicated efforts to coordinate services. Despite TFF's attempts to bring workforce and child support partners to the table, more work was needed to strengthen relationships and clarify responsibilities among partnering agencies. TFF did a good job of securing support from executive level administrators and elected representatives but this did not always translate to action among front-line staff. Some sites met with Bootstrap staff and their local child support enforcement or workforce offices and reported that this helped to increase referrals. One local staff member suggested that requiring local partners to meet regularly might have strengthened relationships and established accountability. Likewise, TFF program planners recommended more training for child support and workforce center staff.

Young fathers were sometimes not interested or prepared to accept program requirements. Local site staff reported that many fathers simply were not interested in participating in Bootstrap. The quantitative data on referrals were not complete enough to conclusively identify which personal characteristics contributed to low Bootstrap enrollments. However, all research sources identified reluctance at becoming involved with the formal child support system as a contributing factor for young fathers' low enrollment rates. San Angelo was the one noteworthy exception to this finding. Although San Angelo did not meet its enrollment goals, HFSA staff reported that their strong partnership with the local child support enforcement office and ability to obtain

⁴⁸ TFFI, 2002b.

the trust of its participants appeared to mitigate fathers' hesitancy to become involved with the formal child support system.

Personal characteristics, such as limited education, prior experience with the criminal justice system, or fathers' desire for full-time employment may have also reduced their interest in this project. Additional research is needed on promising strategies to address these issues.

Expert, responsive staff can improve organizations' capacity to assist difficult-to-serve constituents. Although the Houston-Baylor sites' location in a major U.S. metropolitan area probably simplified recruiting to some degree, RMC researchers concluded that staff capacity and leadership had a significant impact on the sites' success. Houston-Baylor staff had extensive experience with social services delivery and a good understanding of the challenges associated with working with difficult-to-serve populations. According to TFF staff, personnel at the Houston-Baylor sites were less dedicated to their own strategies for serving fathers and very responsive to their recruiting strategy suggestions. The Houston-Baylor sites enjoyed driven leadership that took the initiative to work out miscommunications with workforce centers, experiment with recruiting at child support courts, and network with local agencies to develop referrals.

The Section 1115 grant timeframe created significant barriers to conducting an experimental, constantly evolving project. The Section 1115 grant created valuable opportunities for TFF to explore new strategies for serving fathers but the original 17-month time period for the grant did not allow sufficient time for the flexible, experimental design of Bootstrap to stabilize before the evaluation period began. The impact evaluation requirement drove pressures to enroll a sizable population of fathers in a very short time period. Given the exploratory nature of this project, the time constraints created an ambitious learning curve for organizations that had little or no experience working together in the past. Time pressures also negatively impacted the ability of sites to spend time engaged in strategic planning.

Site-specific factors (additional local eligibility guidelines; staff turnover) and issues related to the fathers themselves (lack of permanent address/phone number; limited education; no work experience) also had a significant impact on enrollment trends.

B. Recommendations

Lessons learned from this demonstration should be considered when planning future programs designed to meet the needs of young, low-income noncustodial fathers. Findings from this research suggest several recommendations for future initiatives designed to serve this population:

- 1. Program designers should carefully review the restrictions of potential funding sources.** Funding sources can have significant effects on the structure and function of programs. Program planners should be mindful of time limitations and evaluation requirements that may not be well suited to innovative, exploratory programs.
- 2. Significant time should be reserved for planning, coalition building, and testing prior to full-scale implementation.** Program designers should target funding sources that provide ample time to design, initiate, and correct program design. Demonstration sites should conduct training on issues related to serving low-income young fathers and allow sufficient time to develop relationships with workforce service providers and child support enforcement offices. Programs should include formal training for frontline OAG and workforce staff. A realistic timeline should be established and regular communication between partners should occur to create accountability. A test phase allows innovative and exploratory programs an opportunity to work out design and implementation issues prior to full-scale implementation. Program designers can identify best practices and establish continuous improvement processes to resolve challenges that develop as a program is being implemented. Additionally, test phases can improve the quality of program evaluations by encouraging stability and routine, making it easier to identify cause and effect.
- 3. Best practices for recruitment should be identified and integrated into program design.** There is a need for additional research into promising strategies for engaging low-income young men in job-training and social services programs. Recruiting strategies should be clearly outlined in program design and implementation plans. The necessary resources for market research, outreach activities, and publicity should

be included in the program budget. Because no strategy is likely to be universally successful, program planners should allow for great flexibility in this area.

- 4. Programming should provide strong incentives for fathers.** The literature and findings from this study clearly demonstrate that most low-income fathers have a strong desire to work in a well-paying job. Programming should take this and other preferences into account. Financial incentives should be sufficient to meet fathers' and their children's needs. Stipends should be designed with local cost-of-living in mind. Program designers should consider developing initiatives that enable participants to receive training after gaining employment. The Welfare-to-Work and other workforce program literature may provide promising strategies.
- 5. Workforce partners need incentives to work with difficult-to-serve populations.** Staff at workforce centers face demanding performance measures that make working with difficult-to-serve populations burdensome. Lawmakers should promote policies that reward rather than penalize organizations that take on this hard work. Program designers could possibly mitigate this problem by providing incentives (financial or otherwise) to staff members working with fathers.
- 6. Staff leadership must be flexible, adaptive, and experienced.** Fatherhood programs require talented leadership and well-trained staff. Sites that employed staff with workforce backgrounds reported success bridging the social services and workforce worlds. Leaders at local sites should demonstrate the capacity to build referral networks with local organizations, effectively communicate priorities to staff members, be open to considering feedback and suggestions, and approach programmatic challenges with creative solutions.
- 7. Innovative approaches to child support enforcement need to be explored.** The involvement of child support enforcement in programs serving young fathers clearly continues to act as a deterrent to participation. Child support policies for such demonstrations should be modified to address the situations of fathers living with and/or supporting their child and the child's mother. Programs that partner with child support enforcement agencies must dedicate energy and resources to improving the punitive reputation of child support, educating fathers about their rights and

responsibilities, and ensuring that all parties provide fathers with a consistent message. San Angelo reports making significant progress in this area and deserves additional attention as a promising model.

In conclusion, there is still work to be done to understand how to best serve young, low-income, noncustodial fathers. Demonstration projects are an ideal tool for testing different service delivery models but must build on lessons learned from previous projects to further advance the quality of services for fathers. Careful planning, realistic goal setting, open communication, and compelling programming appear to be promising strategies and deserve additional research attention.

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Appendix A

Texas Bootstrap Project Survey Instrument for Local Program Staff

Background

1. Can you tell us about the general history of your program?
2. How did you become involved with the Texas Fragile Families Initiative?
3. How did you become involved with Bootstrap?
4. Why were you interested in participating in these programs?

Referral Process

5. Describe the referral process and how you tracked referrals.
 - a. How did you define a referral? (Formal or informal? Consistent?)
 - b. How did you define an enrollment?
6. What organizations did you receive referrals from?
 - a. IV-D Court system
 - b. Child Support Enforcement/OAG
 - c. Criminal Justice System
 - d. Texas Workforce Commission
 - e. Community Organizations
 - i. Please list:
 - f. Human Service Agencies
 - g. Hospitals/Health Care Providers
 - i. Please list: (maternity ward staff, pre/post-natal programs, etc.)
 - h. Custodial mothers
 - i. Public Schools/Community Colleges
 - j. Word-of-mouth
 - k. Other

- l. Which partnerships worked best?
- m. Why?
7. Which partnerships failed to bring in new participants?
 - a. Why?
8. How did you foster relationships with referral agencies? (Mutual site visits, staff training, cross-program staff interaction, peer-learning colleges?)
9. Were there any organizations that you attempted to foster relationships with that failed?
10. Did working with difficult-to-serve customers create a disincentive for partners based on their pre-established performance measures or other accountability standards?
11. Describe your relationship with the local child support office.
12. Describe your relationship with the state OAG.
13. Describe your relationship with TWC.
14. How many (or what percentage of) referrals spoke with Bootstrap staff?
15. How many referrals enrolled?
16. What criteria did you use determine eligibility?
17. Did you change eligibility criteria over the course of the program? How?
18. Among those that spoke with staff and did not enroll, how many were not eligible?
19. How many were eligible but chose not to enroll?
20. Among fathers that chose not to enroll, what did you perceive as the primary reasons?
 - a. Fear that the program was a CSE sting or would result in other sanctions
 - b. Fathers prefer to provide children with informal supports
 - i. Is this due to pass-through policies?
 - ii. Were fathers already living with custodial mothers and children?
 - c. Fathers prefer to find employment immediately (v. receive training)
 - d. Bootstrap offers inadequate incentives
 - i. Was \$400/mo insufficient to pay living expenses?
 - e. Unwilling to sign a Personal Development Contract
 - f. Requires paternity establishment

- g. Language barriers
 - h. Transportation barriers
 - i. Substance abuse barriers
 - j. Health and/or Mental health barriers
 - k. Discouraged workers – do not believe they can find employment in bad economy
 - l. Plan to get married and did not perceive themselves as target audience
21. Were any fathers mandated to participate?
22. What impact does mandatory/voluntary referral status have on the number of fathers that enroll?

Recruiting

23. What kinds of publicity tools did you use? (Obtain documentation when possible. For each tool used: Was it bilingual? How many did you print? Where was it distributed or displayed? Was it effective? How do you know?)
- a. Printed brochures/pamphlets
 - b. Posters/fliers
 - c. Radio ads/PSAs
 - d. TV ads/PSAs
 - e. Print ads
 - f. Sponsored events
 - g. Promotional materials (pens, hats, t-shirts, etc.)
 - h. Bus/train/taxi ads
24. Other
25. How do promotional materials represent the program? (holistic, workforce oriented, parenting oriented...)
26. What tools worked best?
27. What tools seemed to have no effect?
28. What kinds of outreach activities did you engage in?
- a. Hired outreach staff
 - b. Recruited outreach volunteers or interns

- c. Recruited program graduates/participants to conduct outreach activities
 - d. Visited locations likely to be frequented by young fathers
 - i. Please list:
 - ii. Please identify activities (set up table, made presentations, etc.):
 - e. Held community events (BBQs, picnics, etc.)
 - f. Targeted mailings
 - g. Phone Campaign
29. Other:
30. What strategies worked best? How do you know?
31. What strategies were ineffective?
32. Did you offer any incentives beyond the standard incentives provided by Bootstrap?
- a. Transportation
 - b. Free Food
 - c. Child Care
 - d. Other
33. What incentives did fathers respond to most?
34. What incentives were ineffective?
35. Did staff members have experience or receive training in...
- a. Working with difficult-to-serve populations?
 - b. Working with young men?
 - c. Cultural sensitivity?
36. Were staff members well educated on the issues that face low-income fathers?
37. Were staff members receptive to the idea of providing services to noncustodial fathers?
38. Did staff anticipate how difficult it would be to serve noncustodial fathers?
39. Are men well represented among staff members?
40. What steps, if any, have you taken to make the physical environment welcoming to fathers?
41. Is your site accessible via public transportation?

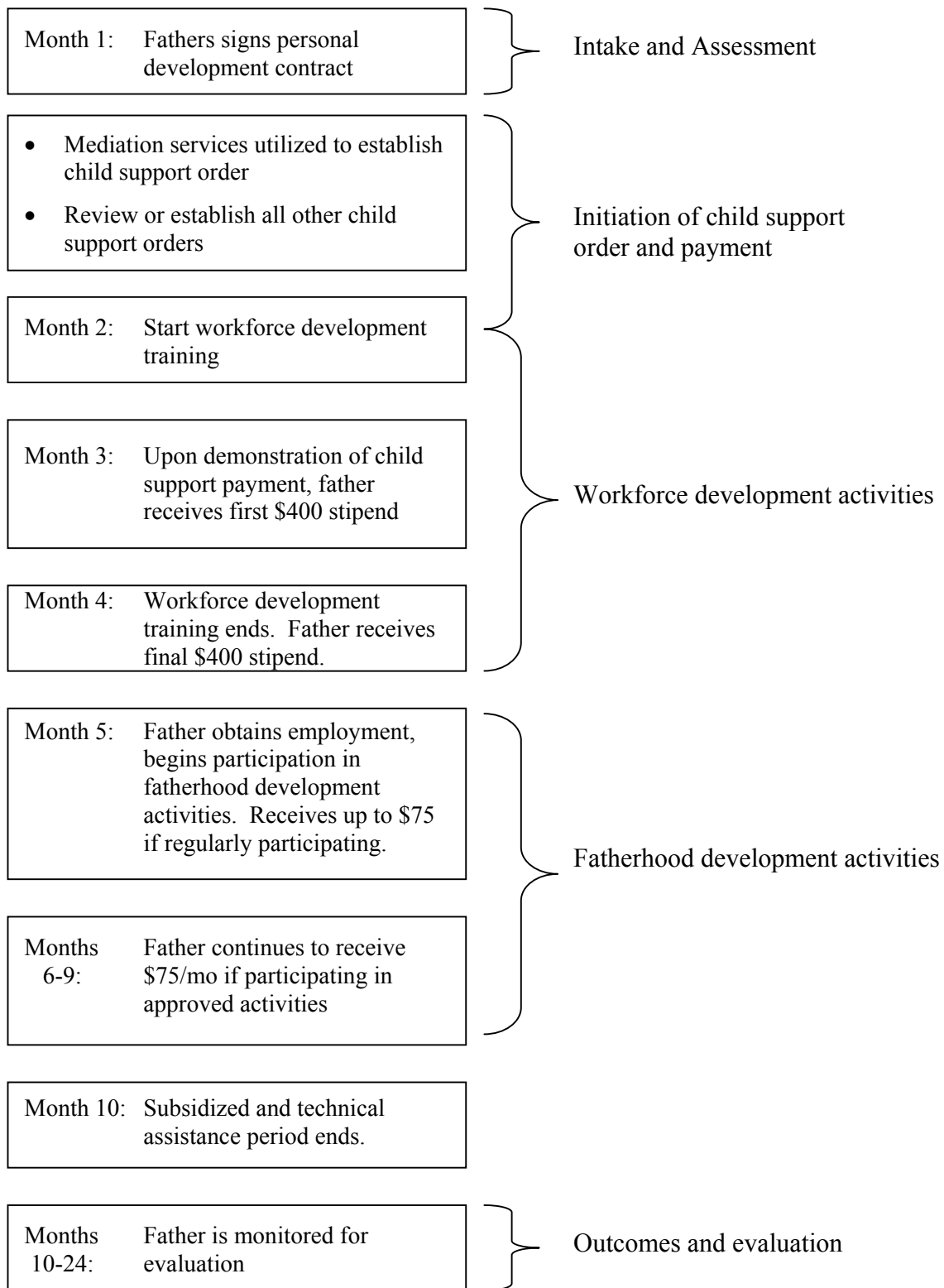
42. Do you have flexible and/or extended business hours?
43. Did you or your partners experience any staff turnover during the Bootstrap program?
 - a. What impact did this have on your ability to recruit participants?

Conclusions

44. What do you believe to be the primary factors contributing to the low enrollments in the Bootstrap program?
 - a. Partners did not refer eligible customers
 - b. Partners were unable to locate fathers to refer
 - c. Fathers were unaware of social service programs available to them (i.e. sought no services so they had no chance of being referred)
 - d. Referred fathers did not contact Bootstrap
 - e. Referred fathers contacted Bootstrap but chose not to participate
 - f. Referred fathers contacted Bootstrap but were not eligible
 - g. Other:
45. If you were giving advice to other fatherhood programs about attracting participants...
 - a. What best practices would you suggest?
 - b. What practices would you suggest they avoid?
46. Additional feedback?

Appendix B

Original Program Model



Reproduced from “Project Bootstrap Timeline”, Appendix A, Bootstrap Project Narrative.