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**Down but not out:
Unstable resilience
and strategies to stabilize involvement of low-income fathers**

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Father-child relationships are not static even under the best of circumstances (Belsky, 1984). They require frequent adjustments and adaptations as both father and child change and develop and experience different circumstances, challenges, and resources (Palkovitz, 1987). Other family relationships shift as well, and as a result, fathers and families experience transitions within fathering continuously. Palkovitz & Palm (2005) list a range of triggers for transitions in paternal involvement, including child development, family crisis, individual changes in the father, cohort or historical shifts, changes in employment, and counter transitional changes.

Transitory fathering for low-income men

Low-income men are particularly at-risk for lack of engagement with their children, in part because they experience more critical transitions in and out of households, intimate relationships, father/child relationships, and employment than other fathers (Eggebeen & Uhlenberg, 1985; Mott, 1990; Roy, Fitzgerald, & Kaye, under review). Analyses of large national data sets suggest that many fathers, particularly African American men, are in flux, moving in and out of their families' lives (Eggebeen, 2002; Mott, 1990). In terms of work, low-income fathers often cannot contribute much child support (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Rangarajan & Gleason, 1998). Men's precarious position in the labor market threatens their ability to fulfill the provider role (Duster, 1995; Johnson, 2000; Moss & Tilly, 1996; Roy, 2005). Younger fathers may even be unable to make sense of a postindustrial workforce that offers only limited opportunities (Young, 2004).

In particular, father-mother relationship difficulties can also become detrimental to the father-child relationship. It is often difficult for young fathers to separate their feelings for the mother from that of the child (Arendell, 1996). Findings from the Early Head Start and Fragile Families projects, two of the most recent and largest-scale efforts to date to examine low-income fathering, reveal a general trend toward decreasing father involvement with children as the level of father-mother relationship commitment decreases (Cabrera, et al, 2004; Fagan & Palkovitz, in press; Fagan, Palkovitz Roy, & Farrie, under review; see also Roy, Kaye, & Fitzgerald, under review).

In spite of unstable work engagement and low quality relationships, however, low-income men solidify biological ties as fathers and “do for” their children through a range of financial, emotional, and physical support (Furstenberg, 1992; Hamer, 2001). Stier and Tienda (1993) found that some nonresidential fathers made great efforts, typically through in-kind contributions, to maintain regular contact with children and interact in ways that may positively contribute to their development (also see Danziger & Radin, 1990, Mincy & Oliver, 2003). Fagan and Palkovitz (in press) observed what appear to be significant levels of father involvement with children among some men in the highest risk groups—friends and no relationship fathers (see also Cabrera et al., 2004; Carlson & McClanahan, 2002).

Risk and resilience: Stabilizing involvement

A common approach to understanding development in multi-level ecological contexts is the risk and resilience framework (Rutter, 1985). Resilience is a dynamic process, or, as Cummings, Braungart-Reiker, Du Rocher-Schundlich (2003) argue, resilience is “unstable.” Protective factors may prove stressful over time, and risk factors may provide “steeling” effects to enhance coping and facilitate adjustment. Using a risk and resilience framework, we have begun to identify and explore the factors that support or deter men in paternal involvement (Fagan & Palkovitz, in press; Fagan, Palkovitz, Roy, & Farrie, under review; Roy, 2004, 2005). Risk factors reduce the likelihood of fathers’ involvement with children. Resilience factors increase the likelihood of father involvement even when faced with barriers to paternal involvement (Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004).

Fagan and Palkovitz (in press) utilize the risk/resilience perspective to examine factors that correlate with high risk fathers’ involvement with infants. Using the Fragile Families data, they find that the paternal involvement of men who are still romantically involved with the mothers of their children is more susceptible to risk factors. Conversely, three resilience factors - the extent to which the young father’s own father was involved in his life while growing up, attendance at religious services, and frequent contact with extended family members – are more significant for men with limited or no

relationship with the mothers of their children. Roy (2005) found that changes in employment – job loss or underemployment in particular – were often turning points that led to the dissolution of tenuous family households, in which low-income fathers shared residence with their partners and children. Ecological factors, such as gang presence, police activity, and lack of resources, also inhibited men’s involvement with children (Roy, 2004).

Studies also indicate that the meaning that men and families give to fatherhood may buffer them from risk factors. For example, Laub and Sampson (2004) examined the life trajectories of former offenders and found that they desisted from crime as they became married and found mainstream employment. Townsend (2002) identified a set of normative roles – including marriage, home ownership, family-supportive employment, and fatherhood – as “the package deal.” However, achievement of a package deal is a challenge for many low-income men who are marginalized from their families and from mainstream employment. In short, low income men may have a different “package deal” that facilitates adjustment – and resilience – through transitions of fathering.

The present study

In this paper, we examine the processes and contexts that allow nonresidential fathers to maintain close relationships with their children despite multiple life transitions. Specifically, we explore how development may not be an accumulation of normative statuses and turning points but an active and urgent strategizing to find alternative paths to participation as parents, partners, and workers. We focus on analyses of life history interviews collected from 146 fathers with demographic backgrounds parallel to those in the Fragile Families data set. Within this qualitative dataset, we focus on a subsample of particularly resilient fathers to explore the *processes* and *contexts* that shape transitory fathering and that cannot be captured in secondary analyses of large data sets.

To recognize individual and contextual conditions that affect fathers and children in low-income families, we draw from ecological and life course frameworks. These frameworks prioritize the

construction of meaning that reflects individual conditions for fathers in the study. They also allow us to examine contextual conditions through an ecological model of multiple systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Finally, we pay particular attention to changes in men's involvement over time, guided by a life course theoretical framework (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). This framework emphasizes the processes of men's involvement – both gains and setbacks – as transitions within individuals' fathering trajectories (Palkovitz & Palm, 2005), as well as shifts in fathering across cohorts and historical time.

In this study, we first ask: *how do fathers maintain their involvement with children in spite of substantial barriers?* Using a multi-level perspective on risk and protective factors (Figure 1), we examine three strategies for involvement: 1.) pursuit of mainstream models of successful fathering (through employment and education); 2.) creation of alternative models of success; and 3.) building social capital for children through networks of families and friends.

We also explore *how are men's gains in involvement destabilized over time?* We develop a contextualized understanding of *unstable resilience* by focusing on 1.) limited opportunity structures, including low educational attainment and scarcity of legitimate employment; 2.) complex family configurations, including changes in kin networks, negotiations about involvement with children's mothers, and fathering multiple children with different partners; and 3.) personal challenges with frustration, depression, and isolation in the face of multiple "fronts" of adversity.

Methods

Sample

Few data sets document longitudinal changes in paternal involvement with multiple sets of children, and even fewer draw upon fathers' reports. This study analyzes retrospective life history interviews conducted with 146 low-income fathers in the Midwest. In the Life History Studies, we recruited low-income fathers in four different projects, linking eligibility to children's receipt of public assistance or attendance in Head Start programs. In the first project, life history interviews were

conducted with 40 African American men in a community-based fathering program in Chicago. In the second project, interviews were conducted with incarcerated men (75% European American and 25% African American) in a work release correctional facility in Indiana, with a focus on the effects of incarceration on fathering and the re-entry process into families and communities. The third project focused on men's social networks and social support. Interviews were conducted with 35 African American men in another community-based fathering program in Indianapolis. Finally, interviews were conducted with 31 low-income men who were members of families in the *Welfare, Children, and Families Three City Ethnographic Study* in Chicago or who resided in the same communities. All men were involved in fatherhood programs at the time of interview.

In total, this pooled sample of 146 men is diverse by race/ethnicity (62% African American (n=84); 25% European American (n=34); 11% Latino (n=15); and 1% Asian or Native American (n=2)) as well as age (40% 18-14 yrs (n=60); 33% 25-35 yrs (n=50); 26% 36 yrs and older (n=40)). Almost three-quarters of all fathers across these studies had some history of incarceration, and another half had completed high school or a GED. Just over half of the participants were working at the time of the interview. To examine the emergence of paternal resilience more closely, a subsample of 50 fathers who have remained involved with their children over the course of multiple transitions were selected. Their demographics closely matched the overall sample in terms of race, ethnicity, age, and program source. We defined "involvement" as regular contact with children (at least once each week) as well as fathers' established knowledge of children's daily routines. Table 1 presents demographic data on an overall sample and a subsample of fathers for this study.

Data Collection and Analyses

In each project, the research team conducted fieldwork and participant observation in community-based programs. Over course of many months, team members served as case managers (projects 1 and 4) or classroom facilitators for life skills curricula (projects 2 and 3). For life history interviews, we adapted a semi-structured protocol based on the life history calendar methodology

(Freedman, et al, 1988). Men discussed significant transitions and related events in their lives. As a heuristic tool, we developed life history grids to mark approximate dates of transitions in these main domains. Participants were explicitly questioned regarding the timing of transition events in five key domains: residential change; involvement with family of origin; involvement with family of procreation, including partners and children; employment; education; and incarceration. Interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Word and imported into the Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (NUDIST) software for data management and retrieval.

We used a modified grounded theory approach (LaRossa, 2005; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and conducted three waves of coding qualitative texts to provide contextual insights to the trends in analyses one and two. In the first wave of open coding, we coded relevant themes that emerged from each paragraph unit of text, with an emphasis on identifying salient transitions between families. In the second wave of axial coding, we compared and contrasted data across and within different participants' experiences, in order to capture different dimensions of transitory fathering. With the third wave of selective coding, we integrated these comparisons and patterns of transitions, to develop a theoretically-based "narrative" to describe diverse contexts for the process of *unstable resilience*.

Findings

"Changing the way I do everything": Strategies to maintain paternal involvement

As a sub-sample of men from some of the most fragile families in the United States, fathers in the present study who reflected a pattern of resilience represented a significant achievement. Men confronted violent neighborhoods, gang and police presence, institutional discrimination, and limited opportunities as they constructed and maintained a meaningful role as parents. We examined 50 fathers in the sample, each of whom became, for the first time, or remained over time, involved with their children. In this section, we examine three sets of strategies that these fathers utilized in order to remain involved: securing resources for families through pursuit of education and employment, both

mainstream and alternative; making meaning in their personal perceptions of fathering by crafting alternative models of success as men and parents; and turning to significant persons – mothers of their children, paternal and maternal kin, fatherhood programs, and peers - to invest and create social capital for their children.

Pursuit of mainstream models of success. It was clear that fathers in this study identified a clear path to being successful as a parent and partner: by “taking care of their own.” As had been the case with generations of their working class fathers, uncles, cousins, and grandfathers, the most prominent piece of “the package deal” (Townsend, 2002) was still being a provider with family-supportive wages (Christiansen and Palkovitz, 2001). However, local as well as global economies had changed dramatically in the past three decades, and although jobs were plentiful, good jobs (those providing a living wage and commensurate benefits) were not (Roy, 2005; see also Edin & Nelson, 2001; Young, 2004). Family configurations had shifted as well, such that a sporadic truck driver and father of two teenagers, like Mike, 39, found that “providing [for children in different households] means I’ve got to have stuff to put back for them [apart from them being at their mother’s place]...I got to have food, clothing, everything at my house for them too.” Maurilio, a 37 year old Mexican immigrant and father of a preschool age daughter, included realistic limits on his definition of providing. “I give my daughter what I can, but not more than she needs – only what’s necessary. She can’t be hoping that someday someone will give her whatever she wants. You have to teach how to value life and how to make a living.”

Commensurate with normative expectations for breadwinners, men turned to find employment as a strategy to become an involved, and responsible, parent. Many of the fathers in this sample received a push from community-based fathering programs, which helped them to secure at least temporary work, as well as training opportunities. Mo, a 25 year old father of two children in Indianapolis, remained bitter about doing time for a felony and struggled with the stigma of his label as an ex-offender. Being a provider offered him a positive influence and a channel for overcoming his frustration.

The staff [at the fathering program] told me if I made the best and educated myself, I won't ever come back. I signed up for everything from office administration to college courses, and I stayed busy and focused on me. I took advantage of every aspect of this program, anything that was offered, I had a hand in it. I'm working, temp service. It's not much, but it's a job. Hope I can get my foot through the door with this company.

Like Mo, fathers hoped that social engagement and keeping busy with work held the promise of progress, although ultimately these jobs were short-term and did not lead to a long-term commitment to the labor market. Kelvin, a 28 year old father in Chicago, found that even part-time work was supportive of his continued involvement with his daughters. He said that "my job [at a fast food restaurant] eases my brain," in that he was actively engaged in making positive changes – and his wife and children took his job as a signal that he was committed to them. Kelvin said, "My girls even saved up their change to help me with bus money to get to work." The fact that his children contributed to his transportation costs shows family support for fathers' efforts to maintain legitimate employment, but also the reversal of traditional lines of provision.

Other fathers scrapped their way back to earn their GED certificates almost 15 years after dropping out of high school. Whether through programs in correctional facilities or in community-based programs, finishing a high school equivalency was a marker of recommitment for these men, and representative of their need to "get focused" and "get productive" as well as establishing a baseline of competency required by potential employers.

However, few men found that sporadic work engagement or finishing high school resulted in career attainment or even stable employment. Almost all of them endured long spells of unemployment or underemployment, which altered how they thought about being involved with their children. Otis, a young 20 year old father in Indianapolis, almost "went off" on his boss with anger after being fired. He described that, after thinking about the need to remain employable for his kids, he kept his cool and shook the man's hand, "thanking him for allowing me to work there." A 29 year old father of five children in Chicago, Patrice first learned to persist through difficult periods with no work. He felt stronger in some ways, in part because he discovered that "doing" for his child was not simply about

providing money. Patrice constructed an alternative way to understand provision, a construction that allowed him to demonstrate success.

Sometimes the circumstances are that if a man can't provide, then he feels like less of a man. I don't think anybody could take seeing their family wanting for something and not being able to provide it. It's a killer. It probably hurts more than taking a knife to an arm. It hurts and I take these experiences and they make me stronger and not give up. If I can't get this job, it doesn't mean that I can't do for my child. My child requires more than clothes and food and everything else. He requires love, attention, and emotions.

In an effort to "take care of my own," fathers pursued leads on securing resources for themselves, their families and children. Often, the most consistent source of good money was through underground activities such as hustling and drug dealing. Underground and illegal work, even though it may have resulted in plentiful money, usually distanced men from their children, as the nature of the activities are threatening to children and partners (Roy, 2005; see also Edin & Nelson, 2001). Moreover, it often led to incarceration, which even further distanced and at times severed men's relationships with their partners and children.

Crafting alternative models of success. The realization that men had pursued a risky path to its end hit hard when they became fathers. Evan, 39, said that "First, you get a taste of that running life, hitting the bars and all that. Then, you settle down, get a little older, start tiring out. I got married, had a kid, and ERRTT! (sound of screeching tires), knew 'you can't do this or do that.'" Often, it took hitting "rock bottom" for men to reassess their pathways – and to make efforts to rebound away from old patterns. Miles, a 30 year old father in Chicago, left a work release program and tried put his gang activity and drug business behind him.

To change from that lifestyle to this lifestyle, I feel much more comfortable right now. I'm broke, but I've been going down the wrong path, and ten years is too long a time. In order for me to get back with my kids, to be right with my kids, I have to come completely clean.

Coming to terms with the costs of past decisions could take many years and a great deal of attention. As young adults, many men inherited years of abuse from family members, communities, and institutions such as schools. "There's a whole lot of stuff I never forgave anyone for," says Kevin, a 19 year old father, "I hate the world, and I hate to feel that way, but it's the only thing that make me feel

better sometimes.” With few goals to help them make sense out of painful challenges, men turned to fatherhood to give purpose to their daily lives. For example, many fathers understood incarceration as time away from their children and resented the complete barriers that correctional facilities imposed on them as parents. In retrospect, some fathers used fatherhood as path to prevent recidivism (Palkovitz, 2002). Xavier, a 33 year old father of ten children, worked at a fashionable clothing store in Chicago’s downtown Loop. He had finished a series of sentences in prison and refused to “move backwards.”

It doesn’t matter how hard the system hits me, how many punches are thrown, I’m not dropping. I’m not quitting. I’m not going back on the streets. It’s hard. But this is how I base myself: I’m not going to give the next 30 years to anybody except my kids. They’re not going to be 30 years old when I finally get out of jail.

In this way, some low-income fathers in fragile families “steel” themselves by persevering through critical challenges to their roles as partners, workers, and parents. A key factor in “steeling” however, is that the challenges that are faced must not be so formidable that they provide a “knock out punch” to father involvement. Steeling factors are those that present contexts that are difficult but surmountable, similar to an inoculation against disease (Cummings, Braungart-Rieker & Du Rocher-Schudlich, 2003). Older fathers who gritted through hard times referred to a basic strategy of persistence. Doc, a 35 year old father of three boys, worked off the books as an auto detailer. He was pursued by child support court to pay arrearages on a daughter whom he had just been informed was born eight years earlier.

You got to take whatever come your way. You can’t back down. When pressure hits you, you can’t panic. If you panic, you done lost. I got to be happy with myself. You still have to be there with the kids – that’s my thing. I’ve always been a fighter, and I’m not going to let this beat me. I’m not going to let the system beat me. If I can’t beat it, and it won’t leave me alone, I am going to join it. I’ll play the ball game, but I’m going to get something out of it myself. I’ll earn it, I’ll deserve it.

Doc’s adaptation to make the most of difficult situations – and even gain from adverse events by adapting his daily routine – was a common strategy for low-income fathers. Younger men, like Otis, a 23 year old father of a preschooler with another child on the way, had moved beyond what he described as “a pretty low period of depression.” However, he also believed that hard times made him who he was, as a parent and partner, and he did not regret his past mistakes. “If I could go back and change

something, I probably would...but my life being how it is has made me the person that I am, and I'm kinda happy with myself. There's a whole lot I want to get better at, but I just take it one day at a time."

Fatherhood provided a critical turning point, then, when it led to a critical re-evaluation for men themselves. As we found in our analyses, whether it was a purposive strategy or not, men who took responsibility for what they could claim from past mistakes and who could be honest about those mistakes, were also likely to be motivated for involvement with their children. Fathers described the draining process of daily self assessment as "getting straight," "staying focused," "getting clean," and perhaps most basically, "being real." One 22 year old father of a baby girl, Tyrese, lived with his child's mother and his daughter and worked to support them as best he could. He had a clear view on how he struggled to match his values with his daily life.

I can talk a good game, but when it comes to applying it to my real life, there's some type of block there. I gotta be real with myself...I think people should be able to depend on a man, if he's a man. I think you should be able to say, well, I can trust him. A real man don't lie. A real man don't cheat. A real man don't steal. A real man don't hurt other people. All the attributes that I've picked up throughout my life have been totally the opposite of what a man should be – robbing, cheating, stealing, lying, being disillusioned, being influenced by substances.

However, it was painful for men to realize that they sold themselves short by "lying to myself and my kids." For those who turned the corner, there were few guidelines about how to be a good father or a success. Lombardo, a 30 year old tree cutter with a son and two stepdaughters, attributed a change to "getting older...being more mature." However, his ability to survive deployment as a tank gunner during the Gulf War and, soon after returning to the States, time in jail for substance abuse and domestic violence "steeled" him to reassess his priorities.

I guess I'm getting more responsibility and I know what I'm supposed to do. I don't depend so much on other stuff. I think I know what's right; it's just that I chose not to do it. Now that I've been in trouble and don't want to be in this situation ever again. It's not just changing the ways I do some things – I'm changing the way I do everything.

How could at-risk fathers "change the way [they] did everything"? There were few clear options to securing resources any way they could. As younger men, these options seemed more viable than they were for men who wanted to support their children. For Reggie, a 42 year old father of three

grade schoolers, it took four periods of incarceration to motivate him to give up what he had believed could work and to search for another way to be a successful man.

I still hadn't matured in my mind cause I went to prison four times with that other picture in my mind. Each time I got out, I thought I could do that same thing and be successful. You can't get out and expect to do crimes and be successful. It's just not going to work.

Even fathers who were not living in correctional facilities were challenged to see beyond their present circumstances, to alternative models of successful living. Accustomed to his wife's monthly check from public assistance, Kelvin could not move outside of the box he had built for himself and his family: living in two residences with both maternal and paternal kin, working temporary day labor, and struggling to avoid returning to dealing drugs. He attended a fathering class on the South Side of Chicago and "found that there is another way of living, outside of public assistance, and that I could achieve something for me and my family."

These cases illustrate dimensions of an alternative model of success. Kelvin's rejection of welfare dependence, and Patrice's rejection of hustling, indicated that underground activity was not a preferred method for resilient fathers to "take care of their own." However, they also could not aspire to be self-sufficient breadwinners. Many fathers adjusted expectations to providing to realistic levels ("giving what I can when I can"), which did not preclude their positive involvement as fathers who cared for their children. As one father said, "It took a lot – many years – for me to realize that even if I wasn't a perfect provider, there was still room – and a need – for me to be a good dad." This alternative version was similar to a middle path between breadwinner expectations and underground activity, a hybrid role that combined realistic expectations for providing and regular involvement as a parent (see Roy & Dyson, in press).

In part, fatherhood required men to step outside of themselves and take responsibility for another person's well-being (Palkovitz, 2002). This sense of purpose was expressed often as a spiritual realization of a "higher goal." For Bird, an unemployed 20 year old ex-gangbanger who lived with his mother, his responsibility for his infant daughter was related to a karmic lesson from God.

I say God gave me a girl because I messed over a lot of women. Anyone who looks or sounds like me, it ain't happening with my daughter. I'm not a superbad guy, but I can't have that for her. I want more for her, to go somewhere and do something.

If men “gave back” to their children, they became integral pieces of their children’s lives. Miles insisted that “I got to give it back. I owe, I owe for real – the whole world, everything – to my kids.” Fathers had little to no material legacy to pass on to their children, and so they defined success as perseverance, “being there,” and continuity of family legacy. For example, Xavier noted that “they’re mine until I leave this earth. That’s my life after death – those ten little heads. That’s the only memory of me anyone will have.” Even the youngest fathers committed to involvement as an alternative model of success, but involvement in small, daily routines – which could prove to be critical turning points for children, even if they went unrecognized by politicians or even family members. Kevin, still a teen father, spoke of being a social father figure for his cousins.

If kids don't have a father figure, it can be the downfall to most kids. I take my younger cousin, he's four, I take him from my auntie. His father's a crackhead, so I just take him to the movies, out to eat, spend a little money on him. Because when he asks me questions, I like to feed him with knowledge. What you need is to get kids mentally right, and lead them the right way, and they start branching off real quick.

Building social capital for themselves and their children. Men who “stepped outside of themselves” through fathering also found that their families and friends played critical roles in helping them to get and stay involved with their children. If mainstream or alternative pathways did not lead to involvement, some men could rely on their friends and family as a safety net for paternal involvement. For example, paternal grandmothers took over care for men who were incarcerated, depressed, or otherwise unable (even unwilling) to be involved fathers (Roy, Dyson, & Jackson, in press). We refer to prior fatherhood research to assert that even if men were not able to be personally involved with their children, they provided access to kin networks, which served as social capital resources for their children in poverty (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000).

A proven strategy for resilience was men’s efforts to keep in close proximity to their kin networks. Men’s involvement was expected by other family members, but if their interaction with children was cyclical or sporadic, responsibility often could be shared by a core group of nearby family

members. With ten children and having just been released from prison, Xavier relied on his family for care – but he also reciprocated.

I come from a big family. There's nine of us. We're used to this thing. I got a sister that recently passed – she had 9 kids. We inherit each other's kids, so one father is like everyone's father. One sister is like everyone's mother. My sister, my mother, my father, they a lot of help. My family is comfortable with my decisions not to go with another woman who doesn't accept my kids, because I will accept theirs.

Developing and nurturing ties with their own families helped men to nurture social capital for their children. These relations went far beyond the possibility of tapping into grandmothers, aunts, and cousins for extra caregiving. Families were explicit actors in setting expectations for men's roles as fathers, and often role expectations were set at an early age during family socialization to fatherhood. In addition to paternal grandmothers serving as role models for their sons, aunts and sisters were key models for how to provide care and “take care of my own.”

A common motivation for men to become involved despite substantial challenges was men's complicated and on-going experiences with their own fathers (see also Palkovitz, 2002; Roy, 2006). Most men strived to remain involved, while simultaneously reworking the examples of their own fathers' lack of involvement. Amir, an Indianapolis father of an infant, indicated that “I need to be the opposite of [my father] to be a man.” Ray, another father of an infant from Indianapolis, was bitter about his history with his father: “He wasn't ever there. I had to get a job because he wouldn't get me clothes. I looked like a bum; people just talked bad about me. That won't happen with my son.” However, father/son relations continued to unfold over time – and they motivated men in different ways. Until the age of 16, Otis believed he would be the father that his own father never was for him. In and out of jail, his father returned to his life and made a commitment “to be there and never leave again...I wasn't sure if I believed him.” Otis' father kept his promise, and after his son began to talk with his father, the two now have a close relationship – a different motivator for resilience and positive involvement.

Fathers whose children lived in close proximity were better equipped to remain involved despite setbacks. Even though he was unemployed, Kelvin went to his children's elementary school every day to volunteer to read and to help children with math. For fathers whose children lived at a distance, maintaining regular contact was a painful but necessary pathway to remain involved. Bird spoke with his baby daughter each weekend while he was incarcerated, "so she got used to my voice." Jalen returned to Chicago after a five year absence, but left his ex-partner and young son in Las Vegas. He spoke to his son a few times each week but had the sense that distance and the pain of separation might take its toll over months – with his inability to see his son in-person prompting him to pull back and disinvest in the relationship.

As previous studies have found, men's relationships with the mothers of their children were pivotal in establishing and maintaining positive involvement with their children (Fagan & Palkovitz, in press). First, men spent more time with children when they lived together with their mothers. Residence – and even the number of nights each week they spent with mothers – provided a context for greater involvement. However, resilient fathers learned to work through the resistance of mothers who limited access to children. Asante, who had just been released from more than a decade in and out of prison, had begun to build new relationships with his teenage daughters. He accepted their mother's hesitancy, if only because he was so excited to be part of his children's lives again.

I get visitation rights if I'm good. Ha, ha, if I'm good. If I get mad at their mothers, I can't see my kids. But if I'm good with them, then it's alright. Even though I don't care about them anymore, I care about my kids, but their mothers feel I'm just saying that.

As children became adolescents and became more independent of their mothers, the dynamic of interaction between fathers could change substantially. If fathers could "wait it out," they could often communicate directly with their children and reestablish positive involvement. Reggie, a 42 year old father of three children in Chicago, initiated more direct interaction with his 10 year old daughter after his release from prison.

After I got out there were some problems with my daughter's mother. The way I deal with it is to invite my daughter over and let her spend time with her cousins on my side of the family. I don't even talk to her mother

because she's so self involved. I tell my daughter when I'm coming to get her, and I tell her to talk to her mom, let her know if it's OK for me to come get her. She calls her mom when I'm bringing her home.

For most fathers, the strategy of “waiting it out” sent the message to their ex-partners that they were serious about being involved fathers. Mothers remained open to men's contributions instead of curtailing all possibility of involvement.

Fathers also cut back on some opportunities for social capital to build more positive ones when they stopped hanging out with former close friends and peers. As a deliberate strategy to become positively involved with their children, “cutting loose my associates” changed basic daily routines and set the stage for resilience. Reggie admitted, “What kept me sane [after release from prison] was that I didn't go around where I used to do that type of stuff. I never went around. If I did, I'd flee. I just stayed in the house.” In the midst of staying sober, Mike's drinking partners were upset that he never spent time with them.

You don't think about nothing but yourself, and when you drink you don't care. You lose a lot. Sure, you got friends, but you don't care about nobody but yourself. Once you start leaving that stuff alone, your friends start fading away. Nobody comes around me anymore because I don't drink. That gives me time to sit and think about stuff.

Although extra time to think about and enact changes in daily routines could lead to more involvement with their children, men could run the risk of being socially isolated and depressed.

As they managed their networks of friends and family to build social capital for their children, fathers found new sources of social support in their communities. Church groups, AA and NA meetings, and fatherhood programs could replace friends who could reintroduce men to risky behavior. The effects of support groups to keep men “focused” are some of the strongest predictors of enhanced involvement from previous studies (in the Parents Fair Share program evaluation, for example; Curran & Abrams, 2000; Johnson & Doolittle, 1996). Although it is only one aspect of resilience, such social engagement could give isolated men a chance to step outside of themselves and learn new skills. For example, Danny, a 33 year old father in a work release program in Indiana, was hungry for interaction

with men in similar circumstances. He had reestablished regular contact with his grade-school age children despite incarceration.

With all the services offered to me through Child Protective Services and the court system, I feel that I've improved substantially. I did the anger management group, I did the care group. If I could get back into the fatherhood group, I'd do it again. There's all these tools you can receive from other people. As long as you start applying them and doing your best with them, there's nothing you can't do.

In summary, low-income men in this study attempted a range of strategies to become and remain involved with their children. They did whatever they could to pursue mainstream pathways to “new fatherhood,” as providers and caregivers. However, they also constructed alternative models of positive involvement, through lowered expectations and simple perseverance. Finally, men relied on the support of family and friends to secure their involvement. Each strategy required ongoing daily attention and shifts in relationships and personal understanding of being a parent.

“Am I not trying hard enough?”: Unstable resilience and multi-level risks

When we examined a longer trajectory of involvement for very high risk fathers, beyond a few years early in children's lives, we found a succession and mix of different strategies for involvement. However, what marked these men's trajectories in work and family life was not a clear path of positive progress, but a consistent churning between progress and setbacks over time (Fagan, Palkovitz, Roy, & Farrie, under review). Within each achievement of resilience was a potential element of risk for men's lives. These patterns of churning represent a marked *unstable resilience* which is qualitatively different from how father involvement is typically conceptualized among middle class fathers (Townsend, 2002).

In this section, we situate men's efforts to remain involved by closely examining the contextual barriers which lead to unstable resilience and setbacks on hard-fought gains in involvement. We explore the limits of opportunity structures, specifically neighborhood dynamics, local economies, and institutional systems such as child support and family courts. We also examine changes in complex family configurations which lead to unstable resilience, such as conflictual relations with children's

mothers, family health problems, and multi-partner parenting. Finally, we return to men themselves to understand the effects that these ecological factors have on a sense of frustration, social isolation, and even depression, which can limit and even terminate positive relationships with children.

Turbulence and churning in limited opportunity structures. The motivation that men garnered from new strategies for involvement with their children was notable, but it was common that such motivation did not lead to sustained involvement over time. Fathers eventually lost the initiative that they had built up during their participation in fathering programs or upon release from incarceration. For example, Otis had found a good part-time job and had finished his prep course to take the GED exam, and he felt that he was moving toward positive changes. Within two months, he had lost his job and failed the GED, and most significantly, learned that he was going to be a father for the second time. Eric, a 27 year old father of three children in Indianapolis, was clean of prison and drugs. Although he had dropped out of high school, he was intent on hard work as a way to be a good father. His frustration with limited opportunities began to diminish his ability to care for his children.

I don't get it. I don't get it. I don't know if I'm not trying hard enough, or it's not meant for me to work right now. Lord knows I've been trying and trying. I feel like I'm a little boy out there but I got bills to pay. I need to get my priorities together. Just handle business like I'm supposed to. Before I had 3 kids, I handled my business and everything that needed to be paid was paid on time. I hit rock bottom. It feels bad not working. My conscience messes with me.

Many fathers found that, in the midst of positive changes in their daily routines, the “past” returned with a vengeance. For example, Eric was driven to find employment for his child, but he was dogged by poor credit rating and unpaid medical bills from nine years earlier. As he recounts, “One day these guys I'd been messing with came to my side of town, and I got stabbed in the chest, top of shoulder and back. It's a true saying, you get stabbed in the back. My lungs collapsed, twice.” His debt had accumulated from unpaid medical bills, which he refused to pay.

It wasn't something I did to myself...how can I pay for that? I just got a lot of stuff going on. I was helping my children out until stuff caught up with me and I just barely can help myself. Cases caught up with me, from when I was out running the streets, getting in trouble with the law.

As he reflected on his current successes (being involved with his children, working at a good job), Eric echoed a common theme: that it was easy for fathers to “catch a case,” like a lurking illness in their neighborhood.

In addition to the system of correctional facilities that many fathers had moved through, men in the midst of positive changes and engagement with their children were uniquely threatened by institutions that monitored their work activities and determined their worth as parents. Child support systems tracked men for payments to the state, to reimburse their children’s receipt of public assistance. Such policies could interfere with work opportunities. Doc was self-employed as an auto detailer who was mandated to participate in parenting and job training classes by child support court. “It’s kind of messing my plans up,” he said. “I’m here, but I’m missing doing business. I’m not no public aid person, I don’t want a hand-out. I just work – I love to work with my hands.” Kennedy, a young father in Indianapolis, worked at a job making \$14/hour, with child support payments of \$115/week. He found it was difficult to pay for his rent and cover child support to the state.

I slacked on my payments and my daughter’s mother just stopped letting me see her. I didn’t know the consequences. I’m like, “My daughter ain’t no piece of material. She ain’t no car that we’re sharing. Why should I pay on something I’m not seeing?” I stopped paying for a year, and my payments were bumped up so high that I ended up getting locked up. The other day I missed two weeks of payment and she had my daughter call: “Daddy, Mommy wants to know what’s up with the money?” That ain’t cool – my daughter don’t know about child support. All she knows is that she hasn’t seen me in a year.

Ultimately, fathers perceived their home communities as places to find social support and also as hostile places that could derail them from making positive changes in their lives. A combination of limited opportunities, unresolved criminal charges, debt, threats to health, and risky relations with former peers were core aspects of unstable resilience. Bird noted that the challenges presented by the projects in which he had grown up, where the “momentum of this neighborhood is too strong.” He needed a change of environment with new opportunities, or a reinvigoration of networks of friends and families that were also struggling daily to pull themselves out of poverty.

I just need a new environment. I know me and these projects. If I’m around too long, I’ll get attracted to the same old stuff. I fell right back into it. It’s a whole downer, the whole neighborhood. It’s like eating the same food with no variety. I have more fun asleep than woke. I seen every one around here 13 million times.

In some contexts, unpredictable neighborhood risks directly led men to disengage from their children's lives. Usually, fathers felt compelled to protect their children from gang activity in which they may have been implicated by past or even current affiliation. In contrast, dramatic shifts in Maurilio's family household were linked to immigrant status. He had come to Chicago illegally, in the trunk of a coyote's car, and he reunited with his wife and three daughters after many years. However, he eventually sent his two oldest teenage daughters back to Mexico. Maurilio asserted, "I didn't feel comfortable with them here. I didn't let them do too many things, like go out. I was always worried about them, that they'd be influenced in a bad way. They'll be safer in Mexico."

Changes in complex family configurations. Even as fathers committed to "get focused" and become more involved with their children, their supportive family networks changed as well. Shifts in complex family configurations required that fathers stay closely attuned to relationships that could directly affect their parenting roles. Again, past experiences could set the tone for future family dynamics. Otis grew up caring for his ill grandmother. Due to his adultification at a young age, he continued to feel "tossed" between different sets of extensive caring obligations.

Taking care of my grandmother forced me to be more responsible. I was just getting tossed on her. My mother sent me to help her, kinda like I was forced. I didn't have no problem with it. I had to change her and give her insulin shots when I'm scared to death of needles. I was still young and I never had no childhood. I never got to be no kid.

As Otis noted, kin obligations could result in more responsible approaches to their own parenting. In low-income families, a high rate of health risks for young children could alter men's basic understanding of what it meant to be good fathers. Orlando's daughter was born prematurely at six months, and he spent four months in the hospital every day. "All my family was there, every day. It was hard for me, because she was in the hospital and my wife was too. The most important thing I learned is that I won't let anything get in between me and my little girl." Family illness buffeted most men in the study, and these crises could clarify the importance of men's caregiving. However, men also could lose critical emotional support as parents when their family members became ill or died. Dion, a

25 year old father, had just established regular interaction with his toddler when his grandmother passed away. Her death threatened his commitment to his child, as he felt abandoned as a young parent.

It was hard, man, when she passed. When she was here, it was like the friend I never had. It was like the only friend I had in the world. She was the only person who understood me as a person. From all that stuff I went through with my mother and father, going back and forth, no stability, she's the only one who really knew why. We had deep conversations. She was my best friend.

Moreover, men's negotiations over their involvement with the mothers of their children were consistently shaped and reshaped by new family configurations. Relations with "babymamas" were seldom static, which destabilized men's resilience as fathers. Even when fathers gained motivation and began to pursue strategies to increase involvement, they were at risk to quickly fall off pace if relationships grew sour or conflictual. Coming out of work release, Evan had already lost contact with children from two prior intimate relationships. He was preoccupied with seeing his six-year old son, but contact depended on the immediate relations with his ex-partner. "I tell myself, 'You're not going to blow it like you did the first two.' But I'm on a good track of blowing it already. I'm trying not to let the tire completely off the rim."

If close proximity was a clear cut strategy for men's involvement, children's departures to distant locations were beyond the control of fathers and could quickly jeopardize men's positive changes. For example, Evan sensed that "it was almost a done deal" that he would lose any involvement with his son because his ex-partner had moved to Florida. He realized that "I'll have to pay for him, his mother, and her boyfriend to come visit me here if I want to see him. That's not going to happen easily." Dion, dealing with his grandmother's death, was doubly struck by the physical absence of his daughter from his life. After living with and caring for her during infancy, he could not rebuild a sense of fatherhood based on phone calls.

By her being with me for that long, and then just fading out of the picture, it's the distance and the separation. That did something to the relationship. It just drifted away like that, and she still talks to me, but I can sense the distance. And that really bothers me, man, it really bothers me.

Over time, about 40% of the larger sample of fathers had children with multiple partners. Family configurations and expectations for involvement grew increasingly complex, with men risking steady

relationships with their children as they took responsibility for children in different family households (Roy, Kaye, & Fitzgerald, under review; Roy, Fitzgerald & Kaye, under review). Again, men's status as "involved fathers" was problematized: were men involved with one set of children yet not another? What is resilience across multiple family systems? Lucas, a 36 year old father with three children from Chicago, had been a regular in the household of his three children until he was married with a new partner. He tried to reassure his former partner and reintegrate his boys into his new family, with little success.

I haven't seen my kids for 2 years. That's why I've been going to court and talking to lawyers. I'm trying to get the judge to at least grant me visitation rights. I told their mother that when the summer comes, let me take them. You don't have to worry about school, school uniforms, whatever they need I'll supply that and make sure they have it when they come home. You can have the rest of the year. But she feels that my wife is going to hurt her. And the kids, they're always asking, "Why can't I go to my dad's house?"

In contrast, Doc was notified that he had an eight year old daughter from a brief relationship years earlier – and that child support courts would establish paternity in order to collect arrearages. His efforts to stabilize his auto repair business run out of his garage and his involvement with his children were complicated by complex new family configurations.

I met my daughter in the court room. To me, they were forcing her on me, they never gave me an option. They were strictly about the money. I didn't even know where to start with her. She's already 8 years old. Honestly, I don't even want to be part of it. I'm being totally honest. If her mother would have approached me, not through the courts, but maybe 5 years ago, it would have been different...

Frustration, depression, and social isolation. Men's personal struggles with neighborhood and family factors could unravel months or even years of slow progress in establishing ties with children. Even low-income fathers aspired to the heightened expectations of "new fatherhood," in which men are providers and caregivers for their children. As LaRossa (1997) argues, however, the gap between the culture of successful fatherhood and the actual conduct of men as parents is sizable. This was particularly true for poor men with unstable resilience.

With few resources to fulfill even their own expectations, fathers grew frustrated over time. Some turned to blaming mothers of their children or "being wronged" by the system of criminal and child support courts. Others grew depressed and unable to assess their own involvement with their

children. Eddie was a 24 year old father of two daughters with two different mothers. He had secured a union job as a forklift operator, which he lost after he was injured as a bystander in a drive-by shooting. Eddie continued to reassure himself about his accomplishments as a father, but as he grew more depressed, he seemed more unrealistic about the effects of his limited involvement.

I think I'm a great parent, actually I do. I might have some flaws, but to me, honestly, I've devoted my life to my kids. Trying to. By the ages they are, and things they're doing – my daughter walking early, talking, being toilet trained. She wouldn't be like that if I hadn't helped her mother with her other children. They were headed down.

As men took their frustration and setbacks personally, they ran the risk of destabilizing their involvement with their children in two ways. First, it was a simple step to pull back from contact with children if men perceived that they had not succeeded as fathers. As one of the youngest fathers stated, “It starts with you. Not your babymama or how you feel about her. If you can't take care of what you put down, you're a failure.” Voluntarily putting distance between themselves and their children, men created their own barriers to involvement, and in some ways, these barriers were more difficult to surmount than factors that preceded them, such as lack of good jobs or conflict with children's mothers. Otis reflected on the impact of being too critical of his involvement and accomplishments.

There were times I was less involved, times when I was feeling down on myself. When I felt down on myself, I just would shut her off. I wouldn't want to go around her. I used to feel bad, looking at her like, “Man, I can't do nothing for you.” It used to hurt me. So I used to try and keep a little distance.

Second, it was also a simple step to slide back into “living hard” on the streets, which was a lifestyle that was not conducive to regular and positive involvement with children. After struggling to “get focused” and move away from the streets, fathers felt pride in “not being like the others...not being in that life anymore.” Destabilized by rejection by mainstream society, such as employers, educational institutions, court systems, by mothers of their children and their families, or even by men's own families, it made sense to pull away and protect one's self. Dion recognized how he moved back and forth, between positive changes and setbacks, and how he took solace in disengaging from those who were most critical of his decisions.

A man need to be felt like they're wanted and in the family. A lot of people aren't strong enough to come out of being scorned. That really messes with a person's mind frame, man. You develop a distant relationship toward

everybody. You don't wanna let nobody into your world, because you're so defensive. You were never brought into nobody else's world that you loved. You don't want nobody else in yours to come in and then make a fool out of you or use you or hurt you or anything. You develop a type of guard around you. And it's wrong, but you develop a sense, a type of guard around you.

Examination of the contexts in which low-income men create strategies for involvement suggests that positive gains can be momentary at best. We suggest that men's resilience is unstable, reflected in churning between gains and setbacks. Fathers discussed the "momentum" of their neighborhoods that prevents them from sustaining involvement, as well as sudden shifts in family networks that jeopardize their relationships with children. Ultimately, through adaptation and coping, many fathers become frustrated and depressed from these setbacks, which are magnified in contrast with past positive changes. Distancing themselves from their children, in this way, becomes a real option for low-income men committed to being involved parents.

Discussion

The findings of the present study revealed that patterns of transition vary greatly among low-income fathers. Men in fragile families experience a notable number of both negative and positive life transitions over time. Our findings suggest that the effects of life transitions are cumulative and that it is not just negative transitions but also positive transitions that affect levels father involvement with young children (Palkovitz & Palm, 2005). As researchers, as practitioners, and as policy makers, we need to exercise utmost caution not to stereotype at-risk fathers if we want to create conditions that will facilitate their positive engagement with their children.

Reconsidering risk and resilience over time

Three patterns of transitory fathering are promising for further research and policy and program development. Though there are certainly commonly shared aspects of the contexts of low-income urban fathering, unique histories and rapidly changing circumstances contribute to different fathering

trajectories with consequences for intergenerational development and influences on shaping the next generation of fathers. Moreover, as we illustrated in a multi-level model of risk and resilience, father involvement is shaped by proximal and distal conditions over time.

One of our central findings is that manifestations of resilience are fragile. Many fathers in our sample experienced churning back and forth through times of more and less functional and positive involvement with their children. Though some may view these findings to be an empirically grounded and disheartening confirmation of the dire condition of fathering in low-income urban fathers, the qualitative data elaborated for us that resilient fathers in low income situations adapt to multiple setbacks. Many men have viewed these setbacks over generations, as patterned behavior in their own fathers as well as in their fathering behavior. Rather than viewing this as an indictment of the futility of bringing positive change, this pattern can be alternatively understood to represent men's epic efforts to overcoming a high number and continuous stream of circumstances that present real and persistent challenges to involved fathering. This persistence indicates the importance of fathering roles and the motivation of these fathers to stay connected to their children in the face of daunting odds.

The multiple transitions and churning of men in and out of involvement support the emerging notion that resilience is unstable. While most studies using a risk and resilience framework focus on stable traits and environmental conditions, this study complicated the framework. The recognition of a contextualized resilience *process* is a contribution in that process prioritizes change over time. In order to capture the richness and diversity of lived experiences from life history interviews – and not to generalize about the absence of low-income fathers – risk and resilience factors can be conceptualized as interactive through course of life transitions.

Another important question for further analyses is whether men who meet some of the challenges of persistent involvement with their children experience a new sense of success and or resilience. Some researchers have noted that *low* levels of risk and subsequent resilience result in “steeling”, yielding successful coping strategies which can be likened to the effects of inoculation against disease

(Cummings, Braungart-Reiker, & Du Rocher-Schundlich, 2003). However, it appears that *significant* levels of risk present obstacles to paternal engagement that are difficult to overcome at best. Our sense is that while low-income fathers recognize the gains that they have made and do take pride in their ability to maintain involvement with their children over time, they also tend to have a time-tested street wisdom that confronts them with a continual awareness of the fragility of their success. They know that catching a case is a realistic possibility, that relocation of their nonresidential children is frequent, that having the means to visit and give material provisions to their children is tentative, that dissolution of relationship quality with their child's mother or her extended family can deter their efforts, and that keeping clean from crime and substances and free from the entanglements of hustling, drug activity and violence present real and present threats to their ability to continue in patterns of involvement with their children. Men in the sample tended to oscillate from more positive to more negative trajectories (and the converse) as they fluctuated between making positive life choices and falling into negative patterns, recognizing their downward spiral, and then rebounding. Many fathers in these contexts report difficulties in overcoming ecological factors, such as the lure of the street life, gang activity and police presence, drugs, and limited opportunity structures (Roy, Palkovitz, & Fagan, in preparation; see also Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002; Roy, 2004).

Third, as a result of the cumulative and persistent challenges to involved fathering, low-income urban men "find a way out of no-way" by redefining successful fathering and creating alternative models. Given the constant inability to meet middle class standards of good fathering, a new model is constructed and enacted in a manner that is consistent with the realities of life in the context of limited opportunities and high risks. Successful fathering in the context of low-income urban fathering is largely focused on avoiding the common pitfalls (crime, incarceration, violence, substance abuse, total absence of income generation) and doing "as much as you can" (providing and involvement/"being there") with the opportunities that do exist. Again, different fathers manifest individual differences in coping and resilience in attaining their alternative model of successful fathering. Some make poor

choices when faced with the cumulative pressures and engage in risky behaviors (e.g., hustling) that compromise their ability to maintain involvement over time.

Implications for programs and policies

These findings lead to the question of whether these skills can be taught through programs. Is it likely that marriage classes or fathering classes will yield significant and lasting gains in this population of fathers? Our sense is that some men may be responsive to program offerings. The qualitative analyses revealed that some men were highly motivated to get what they perceived to be much needed direction. However, other men appear to have hardened themselves against “the system” and are neither likely to hear information conveyed through such classes, nor to enact it with any degree of consistency or success. This population of fathers is characterized by a high proportion of men who have negative experiences with educational settings and mandated programs, which may have seemed contextually irrelevant to them, presenting different class and cultural standards for a package deal that do not translate into the realities of their lives. The most likely strategies for successful educational programs would include helping fathers to define and understand alternative patterns of successful fathering in low-income contexts.

Alternatively, can resilient father involvement be mandated through child support enforcement and paternity establishment? Our sense is that these policy tools are unlikely to result in sustained involvement. There tends to be a mismatch between normative expectations for role enactment and realistic opportunity structures experienced by men. Without a history of educational attainment that leads to realistic opportunities for employment that yield a living wage, men who want to fit normative role expectations for fathers take extra-ordinary routes to attempt to achieve provider status. Low-income men need policy-based role prescriptions that allow for alternative patterns of successful fathering so that they will not “catch a case” or succumb to hustling or criminal behavior. In effect, fathers’ *motives* for continued engagement are not problematic; rather there appears to be a lack of

legitimate and sustainable *means* to enact positive engagement across time. Poor decision making or a failure to navigate normative transitions of educational and early employment lead to formidable hurdles when one is expected to provide for and take responsibility for others as well as the self.

A promising channel for supporting low-income fathering comes in the form of ongoing, open-door, community-based support structures. For example, resilient fathers from the community, who have successfully navigated the challenges of involvement with children over time, could be identified and recruited into programs and hired (at a living wage level) to help in developing contextually relevant programs for fathers. These men could serve as models and mentors from within the community and help in establishing appropriate standards and new pathways for positive engagement.

Our data would indicate that programs need to have multiple entry points for participants with contextually relevant services to help fathers through temporary setbacks. Programs could be designed to provide appropriate buffering resources for men during risky times associated with critical turning points such as loss of employment, changes in residence of self or children, coming out of treatment programs for substance use, etc. Recognizing the high rate of transitions in other realms of low income urban life, the creation and continued maintenance of community-based support structures for men promises realistic solutions for instability of men's involvement.

However, it is not simply men who must "change their behavior." Social policies that can stabilize low-income men's lives can go a long way toward allowing the highest-risk poor fathers to engage positively with their children. Policies and programs that help fathers to continue to make positive life changes may be the most effective in preventing low or decreasing patterns of paternal engagement in fragile families across time.

Fig. 1: Multi-level model of risk and resilience factors for low-income fathers

	Unstable resilience (Risk factors)	Strategies for involvement (Protective factors)
Neighborhood	Turbulence and churning	Mainstream opportunities for success (Employment and education)
Family	Changes in family configuration	Social capital
Self	Frustration and social isolation	Alternative model of success

Table 1. Demographics of total sample and subsamples of low-income fathers

	Total sample (N=146)	Study subsample (N=50)
Program		
Chicago fathers program	n=40	n=12
Indiana work release facility	n=40	n=13
Indianapolis fathers program	n=35	n=13
Chicago family programs	n=31	n=12
Race ethnicity		
African American	62% (n=84)	64% (n=32)
European American	25% (n=34)	18% (n=9)
Latino	11% (n=15)	16% (n=8)
Asian or Native American	1% (n=2)	2% (n=1)
Age		
18-24 years	40% (n=60)	32% (n=16)
25-34 years	33% (n=50)	36% (n=18)
35 years and older	26% (n=40)	32% (n=16)

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