



State of Fatherhood in Washington 2024 Study Summary

This summary report covers the high level findings of the State of Fatherhood in Washington Study. Conducted from June 2023-2024, the Study is a first-of-its-kind effort to assess the current state of the Washington fatherhood ecosystem in order to develop a clearer understanding of progress among individual agencies, programs and policies and their contributions toward the Washington Fatherhood Council's goals and vision. The Study considered the national context of fatherhood policies, programs and leadership as well as lessons learned from other states' fatherhood commissions and initiatives. This backdrop was used to evaluate, in detail, the fatherhood landscape in Washington state. The Study team included the Washington Fatherhood Council, Camber Collective Consulting Group and researchers from the University of Washington.

This Study represents the culmination of a year's worth of work to understand fatherhood in Washington. What we found is that more work must be done to understand the unique experiences of fathers, providers and systems across the state, and the Study provides concrete next steps. More information about the Study is available on the Washington Fatherhood Council website and a full version of the report will be posted August 2024: www.wafatherhoodcouncil.org.

Overview

Founded in 2018, the Washington Fatherhood Council is a multi-sector effort that leads change through its efforts to create a more father-friendly culture in Washington state. The current systems serving families in Washington often exclude or create unintended barriers for fathers and families through their lack of intentional focus on equity and access for fathers. The Council works to coordinate and influence alignment of efforts across key state agencies and their funded local programs and community partners that play critical roles in achieving the Council's vision. The Council and its partners work collectively to amplify the voices of fathers and father figures in Washington to promote fatherhood inclusion, equity, diversity and research activity that strengthens families and maximizes children's potential.

A significant body of research shows that children and families experience improved outcomes when fathers are meaningfully and positively engaged in their children's lives. Positive fatherhood involvement benefits children across their lifespan and developmental domains, including healthier

birth outcomes, higher academic achievement, school readiness, social emotional development and strong self-esteem. Co-parents also experience less stress and improved maternal or postpartum outcomes. Despite the unique and vital role that fathers play, many states have not consistently



developed and funded targeted services to equitably support fathers. Policies and funding for fatherhood-specific services are limited at the federal and state level, and often narrowly engage fathers as a financial provider rather than more broadly supporting them in a holistic caretaking role. Building on the evidence, Washington and many other states are seeking to transform traditional approaches to support fathers in playing a fully integrated role in the lives of their children, regardless of marital or co-parenting status. Making this shift requires collaboration, bringing a systemic lens and intentional focus in shifting away from policies, practices and programs that often marginalize the role of fathers in the family.

Key Study Findings

Fathers and fatherhood figures experience stigmas and inequities. While many systems in our state acknowledge racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, gender-based, sexual orientation, gender-identification, disparities and discrimination, gender equity rarely focuses on marginalized fathers in our equity work. Few systems or policies acknowledge the disparities, barriers, challenges and biases against fathers. Further, evidence from fathers indicates that they have limited access to family and resources that are tailored to meet their unique needs. Cultural biases, stigmas, negative stereotypes and harmful narratives also limit access and often completely exclude fathers from systems and structures that are meant to support the whole family.

Data and monitoring systems that track fathers' access to services are not fully developed, making it hard to address inequities. The Study revealed significant gaps in data across a wide array of disciplines. To fully understand the real and perceived inequities that fathers experience, there must be more data and an effective monitoring process to specifically track and measure how fathers receive services and how systems respond. Current data-gathering systems and protocols often categorize unmarried fathers as single adult males or single parents, but miss their co-parenting role. Collecting and analyzing disaggregated data can tell us if and how fathers are eligible, aware, enrolled, accepted, received and if they complete services. At intake, programs and practices should routinely ask all presenting adults if they are parents and if there is a co-parent involved in the child's life. This will help identify opportunities to provide services to all parents, even when one is not in the home, and to begin gathering information about fatherhood involvement and access to services.

Policies and approaches to fatherhood inclusion remain inconsistent. While many agencies and systems in Washington are focused on two-generation or whole-family approaches, they often primarily focus on single mother-child dyads or two-parent households and often miss non-cohabiting parents. Systems are not set up to detect or serve the needs of non-cohabiting parents or single dads with primary custody. This often creates barriers for father-child dyads and misses the complexities of non-cohabiting co-parenting families' unique needs for resources.

Representation of fathers is limited. Provider workforces and parent and community advisory groups across the spectrum of supports rarely have male-presenting members. This limited representation has led to barriers and challenges for fathers' specific needs to be met. It also leads to children missing out on having a positive male role model in services and classrooms. Funding and resources are often directed at scaling existing evidence-based programs, which is needed, but few evidence-based fatherhood programs are considered through that lens. Fathers need to be equitably represented when groups and organizations work to set priorities and policies.

Increased cross-agency funding, planning and coordination are needed. The

"I have a shared parenting plan and I haven't seen my kids in a couple of months because I can't afford to feed them when they visit ..."

– Community Council Father

"Peer mentors inside and out make a huge difference."

– Former Justice-Involved Dad

intersectionality among the unmet needs of fathers must be addressed. This includes needs when reentering the community after a period of incarceration, shelter and housing, financial supports, behavioral health, access to parenting supports, early childhood and K-12 education acceptance, navigating family court and child support. Marginalized parents who are BIPOC, low-income, justice-involved, single and young experience additional disparities and have complex unmet needs. Systems, partners and programs need to be more coordinated and inclusive of fathers and create targeted pathways to provide wraparound and holistic supports. Having an integrated father-inclusive system requires awareness, action and collaboration among all public and private agencies that support individual fathers and peaceful co-parenting.

The Washington Fatherhood Council plays a unique and critical role in shaping solutions to these challenges. Nationally, in states that have made **substantial investments in both capacity and system transformation through legislative action**, councils and commissions are beginning to see results. The first step in building an integrated system is to start with acknowledging the inequities experienced by fathers or father figures, and to understand how supporting all parents is mission-centric for child and family outcomes. In the six short years since the Council's inception, momentum is growing toward mindsets shifting and agency partners engaging with fathers and inviting this perspective into their work. Incorporating the voices and perspectives of fathers with lived experiences can help identify stigmas, biases and perceptions of their roles and shape policy and practice. The Council's inclusive membership approach has played a unique and impactful role in bringing diverse players into the dialogue to shape collective action across the state. Washington needs to make a commitment to sustain this work as part of its equity efforts and benchmark goals.

Washington State Dads Survey and Provider Interviews

Elevating Fathers' Voices: The Washington Father Experiences Survey

The University of Washington partnered with the Council to conduct an online survey of fathers in Washington state. The goals of the survey were to explore fathers' experiences and inform future actions. We had 126 complete, valid responses representing 28 zip codes across the state. Below are some key findings.

- **Fathers who participated had a variety of backgrounds.**
- **Fathers recognized their many strengths as dads.**
- **Fathers identified social, emotional and mental health support as one of the most pressing needs.**
- **Parenting support and food and nutrition services were a bright spot for many fathers.**
- **Other top desired supports included: co-parenting support, housing and child care assistance.**
- **Fathers highlighted not qualifying for services and mother-oriented service environments as the top two barriers to obtaining the support that would be most helpful to them.**

The Council is grateful to all the fathers who shared their experiences. Detailed data from the respondents will be available on the Council website soon: www.wafatherhoodcouncil.org.

Our Roadmap

The stakeholder engagement process for this report provided valuable insights, created momentum and sparked dialogue across these areas of focus. Our road map and Theory of Change seek to build upon this momentum as well as the individual agency commitments outlined in this report, as we seek to drive toward our desired outcomes of better supporting fathers, improving childhood and strengthening families across the state of Washington.



Theory of Change

Long Term Outcomes

Fathers

- ↑ Time with children
- ↑ Parenting confidence and skills
- ↑ Knowledge of child development
- ↑ Social-emotional wellbeing, emotional regulation
- ↓ Social isolation

Children

- ↑ Attachment relationship with father
- ↑ Healthy relationship with both parents
- ↑ Healthy development across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood

Mothers

- ↓ Stress
- ↑ Well-being

Family

- ↑ Cooperative co-parenting
- ↑ Financial stability
- ↑ Balance of gender roles in the family

Community

- ↓ Biases against fathers
- ↑ Celebrating fathers role in family & community
- ↑ Strengthening community to state partnerships
- ↑ Strengthening community unity and belonging

Summary and Next Steps

The Study represents a critical first step toward building a sustainable approach to creating a fatherhood-friendly ecosystem in Washington. Ensuring that this investment continues to pay dividends will require us to build upon key lessons learned and work together to support agencies that are making commitments to action.

The Study has played an instrumental role in shaping the Council's roadmap for achieving the long-term changes we hope to realize for families in our state. This roadmap aids in understanding how the partners fit in the work and that we need to make a substantial cultural shift in how we think about families to include fathers in Washington. The Study findings, as summarized in this document, lead us to three key strategic areas of focus in moving this work forward. The following key strategies align with Theory of Change strategies above.

- 1. Coordination:** The Council is positioned to play an ongoing and expanded role in providing education; evaluating and shaping policies, program capacity and systems agendas; and supporting coordination and collaboration across state agencies.
- 2. Accountability:** The ongoing sustainability of the Council and partner agencies' commitments rely on the ability to make data-driven decisions and investments and to establish mechanisms for continuous improvement. To do so, agencies must commit to identifying key indicators and developing measurement frameworks to track and report on key data over time.
- 3. Activation:** Most important to the ongoing relevance and impact of the Council's work is the ability to engage and activate fathers to ensure that their voices and diversity of lived experience are centered in shaping and moving the statewide agenda forward.

The State of Fatherhood in Washington Study has been a catalytic investment and important step in galvanizing our statewide ecosystem around a common set of goals, strategies and desired outcomes. While this process has been a large step forward, the long-term work has only just begun. We are hopeful that we can translate the learnings of this Study into statewide action in a way that will make Washington a national model for the fatherhood movement.



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