

2020

## The Experiences of Noncustodial Fathers Enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Patricia Ann Smith

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Walden University  
2020

Abstract

The Experiences of Noncustodial Fathers Enrolled in the Georgia  
Fatherhood Program

By

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MA, Georgia College & State University, 2006

BS, Georgia College & State University, 1999

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services Administration

Walden University

May 2020

## Abstract

The federal child support program was designed in the United States in 1975 to reduce the amount of public assistance that is needed by collecting child support from noncustodial fathers. Due to financial barriers, many noncustodial fathers face challenges in paying their child support consistently. Noncustodial fathers are referred to Fatherhood Programs when they are delinquent in paying their child support. While extensive research was conducted on the impact of child support delinquency on families, very little focus has been placed on the challenges that noncustodial fathers face when attempting to complete Fatherhood Programs. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to understand the experiences of noncustodial fathers enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program. The conceptual framework for this study was social learning theory. The research question that guided this study was used to examine the experiences and perceptions of noncustodial fathers who participated in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program. In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with ten noncustodial fathers between the ages of 24 and 56 who were previously enrolled in the program. Interviews were audio-recorded and manually transcribed. I used thematic analysis to identify themes. The findings showed that individuals who enroll in the Fatherhood Program realize the importance of meeting child support requirements and viewed the role of the fatherhood representative as critical to completing the program. This study may instigate social change by providing more insight into child support agencies regarding the importance of obtaining input from noncustodial fathers about their ability to pay child support.

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## Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to the National Child Support Enforcement Association, Office of Child Support Enforcement, Georgia Department of Human Services, and the Division of Child Support Services. I would like to thank each of the organizations for the experiences I gained during my twenty-four years of employment with child support. This experience allowed me to improve the lives of both custodial and noncustodial parents by educating them on the child support process.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

When the federal Child Support Program in the United States initially started in 1975, the amount of delinquent child support had increased from \$7 billion to \$115 billion nationally (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). According to Solomon-Fears (2016), the Federal Child Support Program only collects 65% of the amount of child support owed to families. In the state of Georgia, the delinquency amount was \$2.5 million in 2017 (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2018). To alleviate the amount of overdue child support, the Federal Child Support Program developed many initiatives.

Policymakers view child support as an essential component to assisting families in rising above poverty (Morduch & Siwicki, 2017). When child support is unpaid, custodial parents often apply for public assistance to support their children (Morduch & Siwicki, 2017). Additionally, the child support program was designed to reduce the amount of public assistance that is needed by collecting child support from noncustodial fathers (Hughes, 2016).

Due to their financial challenges, many noncustodial fathers face barriers to paying their child support consistently (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Fatherhood Programs were initiated in child support agencies to improve financial circumstances for noncustodial fathers (Knox & Wang, 2016). In the process of increasing the noncustodial father's ability to become self-sufficient and pay child support, little attention was placed

on the challenges that noncustodial fathers enrolled in Fatherhood Programs face in completing the programs (Dion, Zaveri & Holcomb, 2015). In this study, I conducted a qualitative analysis of the experiences of noncustodial fathers regarding their ability to complete the Georgia Fatherhood Program. I focused on the experiences and perspectives of noncustodial fathers during enrollment.

In this chapter, I will provide background information about the impact of child support delinquency on families. I will also present background information that was developed by Fatherhood Programs to assist noncustodial fathers in becoming self-sufficient. I will include the research problem, research question, conceptual framework, and the nature of the study. Chapter 2 consists of a discussion of the existing literature related to this population.

### **Background of the Study**

Noncustodial fathers who owe substantial arrears balances above \$30,000 are more likely to have little to no income and high child support obligations (Kim, Cancian & Meyer, 2015). To assist noncustodial fathers who face challenges in meeting their child support obligations, several outreach programs were developed across the United States (Solomon-Fears, 2016). As of 2014, in collaboration with child support agencies nationwide, there were at least 77 different Fatherhood Programs established throughout the United States (Dion et al., 2015). The Partners for Fragile Families Demonstration Project was set up in several states to assist noncustodial fathers in strengthening their employability while building a more reliable link to their children (Zaveri, Dion &

Baumgartner, 2015). Unfortunately, only about 50% of the participants completed the program (Zaveri, Dion & Baumgartner, 2015). The Family Formation Fatherhood Program in St. Louis, Missouri, provided the tools needed to assist noncustodial fathers in becoming responsible fathers while also becoming functioning members of society (Fathers Support Center, 2016). As of 2015, only 41% of the enrollees completed the program (Zaveri, Dion & Baumgartner, 2015).

As more research was conducted, the federal government introduced funding to expand Fatherhood Programs (Dion et al., 2015). To assist noncustodial fathers who are either unemployed or underemployed with increasing their earning potential, the Georgia Division of Child Support Services established the Fatherhood Program (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2017). The Georgia Fatherhood Program is a collaborative effort between the Georgia Department of Human Services, Georgia Division of Child Support Services, and Technical Systems of Georgia (Community Outreach Program, 2016). The primary purpose of the Georgia Fatherhood Program is to provide educational assistance, job placement, and training for noncustodial parents who have cases assigned to the Georgia Division of Child Support Services (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2017). As of 2017, only 35% of the enrollees completed the program (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2018).

During enrollment in the Fatherhood Program, noncustodial fathers learn about their environment from individuals who have similar lived experiences and make decisions based on those circumstances. Interactions and collaborations with peers and

family members may contribute to their perspective on how they should engage in communications related to the well-being of their children. Holcomb et al. (2015) provided a discussion of the experiences of 87 noncustodial fathers who participated in a Responsible Fatherhood Program. The study included a discussion regarding their views on becoming fathers, child support experiences, employment, and personal challenges in addition to their perspectives of what they expected as participants in the Fatherhood Program. The results included recommendations on how to make future enhancements in the program initiatives surrounding responsible Fatherhood Programs.

Haskins (2017) analyzed delinquent child support from a societal perspective. The author provided a discussion on the impact that unpaid child support has on other federal programs that provide funding for public assistance. Haskins included recommendations on what revisions were needed to increase the amount of child support that is collected.

Fagan and Kaufman (2015) discussed how the experience of being noncustodial fathers with limited resources could be a contributing factor to how engaged they are in their children's development. The authors provided a discussion on the challenges that noncustodial fathers experience both before and after enrollment in Fatherhood Programs. Each of the participants completed a questionnaire, and the authors analyzed the results. Based on the results, Fagan and Kaufman (2015) provided recommendations to focus on the challenges that noncustodial parents face to assist them in becoming self-sufficient.

While extensive research has been conducted on the impact of child support delinquency on families, very little focus has been placed on the challenges that noncustodial fathers face when attempting to complete Fatherhood Programs. The purpose of this qualitative study was to analyze the experiences of noncustodial fathers enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program to understand why they are not completing the program. In this study, I focused on the perceptions of the noncustodial fathers during their enrollment in the program.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As the number of divorces increase, there is a growing number of children raised in single-parent homes (Turner & Waller, 2017). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2018) reported that approximately 20 million children were living without their biological fathers in the home. In 2014, there were a total of 396,640 cases served by the Georgia Division of Child Support Services, which represented 533,252 children (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2017). As a result of the increase in single-parent homes, family service providers were led to promote programs that encourage fathers to become more active in providing emotional and financial support for their children (Randles & Woodward, 2018). Government organizations are also analyzing ways to place more emphasis on reducing the ever-increasing public assistance liability on the states (Haskins, 2017).

As federal agencies weigh in on this growing number of families that need public assistance, there has been a push for social service organizations to focus on collecting



more child support (Western & Smith, 2018). In the process of focusing on the individual needs of the child, it is also essential to explore ways to improve the relationships between the father and the child to assist in stabilizing the potentially fragile families (Randles & Woodward, 2018). Many Fatherhood Programs were developed to help noncustodial parents who face challenges in meeting their monthly obligations to become self-sufficient (Pruett, Pruett, Cowan & Cowan, 2017).

In the state of Georgia, the Fatherhood Program was established in 1997 as a cooperative agreement between the child support agency, technical colleges, and the judicial system (Community Outreach Programs, 2016). The initial focus of the Georgia Fatherhood Program was to increase the amount of collected child support to families by improving the employment opportunities for noncustodial parents (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2016). The Georgia Fatherhood Program works directly with noncustodial parents who face challenges in paying their child support by providing job training and educational referrals to assist in gaining employment (Community Outreach Programs, 2016).

As of 2015, the Georgia Fatherhood Program served a total of 5,848 noncustodial fathers (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2017). Of this number, only 2,086 participants or 35.6% completed all requirements to graduate from the program while an additional 3,646 or 62.3% were removed for not complying with all terms of the program (Community Outreach Program, 2016). Although the research mentioned above included significant findings, I found no research in which the researchers examined the

experiences of noncustodial fathers enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program. Additional research was necessary that could evaluate the challenges that noncustodial fathers face in completing the Georgia Fatherhood Program.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to evaluate the experiences of noncustodial fathers enrolled in the program regarding their ability to complete the program. Additionally, I conducted a review to determine how their experiences provided insight into the reasons for the low completion rate for other enrollees. This research was unique because I addressed the existing gap in the literature that did not address the low completion rates of noncustodial parents enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. I also focused on the experiences realized by noncustodial parents who were enrolled in Fatherhood Programs.

The results of this study provided much-needed insight into the barriers that contributed to low completion rates in the Fatherhood Program. The insight lead to recommendations on the questions to ask when enrolling noncustodial fathers. I used participant responses to determine which services were more beneficial. Additionally, child support staff may gain needed insight on how to encourage noncustodial parents to be more successful while enrolled in the Fatherhood Program.

### **Research Question**

The research question that guided this study was:

What were the experiences and perceptions of noncustodial fathers who participated in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The framework for this study was based on concepts from the existing literature and narrowed down to provide more focus on child support delinquency, and experiences of noncustodial fathers enrolled in Fatherhood Programs. I used social learning theory as the conceptual framework for this study. Through social learning theory, researchers evaluate whether individuals learn behaviors from the social environment where they live (Heyes, 2017). Individuals are faced with determining which actions are socially acceptable in comparison to those that are not (Maskaly & Donner, 2015). According to Maskaly and Donner (2015), the determination of whether someone exhibits a behavior based on their relationship with someone else who displays the same behavior is an example of social learning theory.

To evaluate the phenomena of whether an individual exhibits a behavior based on their relationship with someone else who displays the same behavior, I needed an objective lens to appreciate the perspective of the participants. I applied social learning theory to understand the views and learn from noncustodial fathers who were enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. The phenomenon that I assessed was their experiences during enrollment. I used social learning theory to examine how a group of people

experiences a specific phenomenon (Maskaly & Donner, 2015). A more detailed analysis of the current literature is found in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

The purpose of this research study was to determine the experiences of noncustodial fathers previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program. According to Yates & Leggett (2016), when determining the methodology to use in conducting research, it is important to decide which approach will provide the best answers for the research question. For this study, I used a generic qualitative method. The phenomena and group were noncustodial parents who completed the Georgia Fatherhood Program. Participants for the study were noncustodial fathers who were previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program within the past year.

Qualitative researchers analyze data by utilizing in-depth, semistructured interview questions, direct fieldwork observations, and written documents (Fuller, 2017). The design of this study consisted of interviewing 10 noncustodial fathers who previously participated in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. The participants were between the ages of 24 and 56 years old and lived in Georgia. The design of the study consisted of interviewing 10 participants or until I reached saturation. The sample size was selected based on the recommendations surrounding qualitative research to choose a sample size of at least 10-12 participants (Naber, 2015).

In this study, I explored the experiences of noncustodial parents enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program and examined the phenomena that may have contributed to them becoming participants. The criteria that qualified noncustodial fathers for participation in the study were that they must have had a court order wherein they were required to pay child support in Georgia, and they were delinquent in meeting their obligation. An additional requirement was that they were a past participant in the Georgia Fatherhood Program and enrolled at least 1 year ago during calendar year 2017.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Arrears:* are unpaid and overdue debt (Park, Fertig & Metraux, 2014).

*Caseload:* is the amount of work (in terms of cases) with which a lawyer or social worker is concerned with at one time (Solomon-Fears, 2016).

*Child Support:* is court-ordered payments, typically made by a noncustodial parent, to support one's minor children (Blain, 2014).

*Custodial parent:* is the parent who has either sole physical custody of the child of the parent with whom the child resides most of the time (Mincey & De la Cruz Toledo, 2014).

*Enforcement:* is the act of compelling observance of or compliance with a law, rule, or obligation (Solomon-Fears, 2016).

*Noncustodial parent:* is a parent who does not have physical or legal custody of his/her child by court order (Cone-Roddy, 2014).

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are necessary to conduct research and to gain a better understanding of phenomena in a structured manner (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017). I assumed that:

1. Participants provided accurate responses to the interview questions.
2. The social learning theory, as the conceptual framework, was appropriate for this research study.
3. Participants were willing to discuss details of their experiences while enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program.
4. Participants were able to remember the details of their experiences while enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program.
5. The information provided by the participants was enough to answer the questions that were presented.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

In this study, I assessed the experiences of noncustodial fathers who were previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. I focused on the experiences and perceptions of noncustodial fathers during their enrollment in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. The participants were delimited to the state of Georgia in the Fatherhood Program. I did not focus on other aspects of their parenting experiences.

### **Limitations**

The sample size was limited to 10 participants. When I explained the purpose of the study to participants, there was the possibility that they were not honest regarding

their experiences. Their perspective portrayed the Fatherhood Program as either a positive or negative program depending on their experiences. I provided them with clarification on how I would use the research information once the data collection is complete. I gave a consent form to each participant in addition to assurance regarding their information remaining confidential.

I provided reassurance to the participants on how the information was used to make recommendations for improving the existing Georgia Fatherhood Program. I conducted the interviews in the same environment that the noncustodial fathers were familiar with during Fatherhood Orientation Sessions. This process provided a more comfortable setting for the participants.

### **Significance**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the experiences of noncustodial fathers previously enrolled in the program regarding their ability to complete the program. I also conducted a review to determine how their experiences contributed to the low completion rate for enrollees. This research was unique because I addressed the existing gap in the literature on the low completion rates of noncustodial parents enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. I also focused on the experiences of noncustodial parents who were enrolled in Fatherhood Programs. This study contributed to the existing body of literature that was available on the Georgia Fatherhood Program. The results of this study provided much-needed insights into the barriers that contribute

to low completion rates in the Fatherhood Program. Child support staff may use the ideas generated in this study to change how they interact with noncustodial fathers.

### **Summary**

I conducted the study to understand the experiences of noncustodial fathers enrolled in the Fatherhood Program. Previous researchers focused on individuals who face challenges in paying their child support; however, I was unable to find research on the experiences of noncustodial fathers previously enrolled in the Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program. Noncustodial parents who have personal challenges may face difficulty embracing their additional role as a father. As a result, they may not be able to provide the needed support to their children. In this study, I conducted an exploration of their experiences with the Fatherhood Program to help provide insight into why the completion rates are low.

According to previous research, the amount of delinquent child support continues to increase. To offset the amount of support that is not collected, government agencies must develop innovative methods to address the increasing child support delinquency. The Georgia Fatherhood Program was established to assist noncustodial parents who are unemployed or underemployed but, more research was needed to determine the experiences of noncustodial parents and the reasons for the low completion rates. When considering the number of children that are born in single-parent households, more creative approaches were needed to develop processes that improved the probability of children receiving both the parental and financial support needed from both parents. In



this study, I analyzed the perceptions of noncustodial parents while enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Uncollected child support is a growing issue that has received national attention (Haskins, 2017). The Georgia Child Support Program collected a total of \$726 million as of September 30, 2015; however, this only represented 61.29% of the amount that was due (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2016). Once a financial obligation is established for the noncustodial parent to pay child support, the order is legally enforceable through the Child Support Program (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Many resources are available to the Child Support Program to enforce the collection of child support (Solomon-Fears, 2016). Those resources include wage withholding, federal and state tax intercept, interception of unemployment compensation and lottery winnings, liens against personal property, and suspension of professional and personal driver's license (Solomon-Fears, 2016).

In the process of addressing child support collections, it is critical for child support agencies to also address the barriers that noncustodial parents face in paying their court-ordered obligations (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Wendy Keyes-Kimbirk analyzed child support arrears that were due in nine of the largest states in the United States (Keyes, 2018). One of the findings was that the most significant amount of delinquency was among noncustodial parents with little to no income and a limited ability to pay (Keyes, 2018). The consequences for nonpayment can be more detrimental and further hinder the ability to pay. For example, when a noncustodial parent is unemployed, it can

be challenging for them to find economic resources to cover their necessities, which include food and shelter (Strier, 2014).

Additionally, noncustodial parents who lack the means to pay their child support are also at risk of being incarcerated for nonpayment (Haney, 2018). When child support legislation was initially passed, the original intent was for child support collections to be paid automatically by the noncustodial parents (Haney, 2018). There was little consideration for those absent parents who had limited financial resources (Haney, 2018).

Eventually, to assist noncustodial parents who faced challenges in paying their child support, national Fatherhood Programs were developed. These programs addressed the ongoing barriers faced by fathers when they attempted to increase their financial opportunities and become self-sufficient (Pruett et al., 2017). In the state of Georgia, numerous programs were developed to assist noncustodial parents who faced challenges in paying their child support consistently. These included the Georgia Fatherhood Program, Parental Accountability Court, and Access and Visitation Program (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2017). The Parental Accountability Program works with enrolled noncustodial parents to address barriers that prevent them from paying support consistently (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2017). The Access and Visitation Program assist noncustodial parents in obtaining parenting time with their children (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2017). The primary focus of the Georgia Fatherhood Program is to assist the noncustodial parents who are either unemployed or underemployed with gaining employment (Georgia Division of Child

Support Services, 2017). Despite the effectiveness of the Georgia Fatherhood Program, the number of noncustodial fathers who completed the program requirements was only 5% in the year 2016 (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2017).

I provided an analysis of the existing literature around the broad issue of child support enforcement and specifically, the Georgia Fatherhood Program, to address the experiences of noncustodial fathers regarding their ability to complete the program. I evaluated the procedures used to provide employment referral assistance, educational assessments, and job training for participants while enrolled. In this chapter, I will examine the existing peer-reviewed literature on the topic of child support collections and the Georgia Fatherhood Program. This includes an analysis of the research that was available in the following subject areas.

#### **List of Key Areas Examined in the Literature Review**

*Alternatives to Incarceration:* Research that was available on programs that are in place to assist noncustodial parents and prevent incarceration for nonpayment of child support.

*Arrears:* Information was provided regarding unpaid and overdue child support debt.

*Arrears Forgiveness:* Research that focused on strategies utilized by child support programs to reduce child support delinquency amounts in exchange for noncustodial parents participating in Fatherhood Programs.

*Balancing Fatherhood:* Information about the benefits that were realized by noncustodial parents when they balanced fatherhood with being active in their children's lives whenever possible.

*Caseload:* Research regarding the amount of work (regarding some cases) with which a lawyer or social worker is concerned with at one time.

*Child Support:* Information on -court-ordered payments, typically made by a noncustodial parent, to help minor children.

*Child Support Compliance:* Research that focused on strategies in place to improve the payment of child support consistently.

*Custodial parent:* Research on the parent who had either sole physical custody of the child or the parent with whom the child resided for most of the time.

*Enforcement:* Information on the act of compelling observance of or compliance with law, rule, or obligation.

*Fatherhood Programs:* Research on Fatherhood Programs to determine both similarities and differences between the Georgia Fatherhood Program and Fatherhood Programs in other states.

*Fatherhood Program Effectiveness:* This research focused on peer-reviewed resources that discuss the programmatic procedures that are in place for Fatherhood Programs.

*Fatherhood Program Enrollment:* The discussion concentrated on the specific admission requirements for individuals that were interested in enrolling in Fatherhood Programs.

*Noncustodial parent:* Information on parents who did not have physical and legal custody of his/her child by court order.

*Single Mothers Receiving Public Assistance:* This section concentrated on the demographics for parents that fit in this category.

### **Literature Research Strategies**

I began my research by checking several different resources on the Walden University Library site. I used several different subject areas to ensure that all pertinent information was captured. I used several search engines and databases to include various publications, peer-reviewed articles, and professional journals. I then expanded my search utilizing Google Scholar. I also checked the dissertations that were available on the Walden University website to determine if the information was available. The additional search engines that were used included: *Academic Journal, Thoreau Walden University Discovery Science, EBSCOhost, Sage Journals, SOCIndex, PsycINFO, Academic Search Complete, and ProQuest Central.*

To find peer-reviewed articles I used different combinations of the following keywords: *Fatherhood Programs, alternatives to incarceration, arrears forgiveness, balancing fatherhood, child support compliance, Fatherhood Program enrollment, maintenance history, custodial parent, child support, noncustodial parent, child support*

*enforcement, fatherhood, Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA), child support arrears, balancing parenthood, force field analysis, single mothers receiving public assistance, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Fatherhood Program effectiveness, and custodial parents and child support.*

### **Conceptual Framework**

I used Bandura's social learning theory to conceptualize my study. Primary theorists utilize social learning theory to focus on criminally deviant behavior (Heyes, 2017). I used social learning theory to evaluate how individuals learn behaviors from the social environment where they live (Heyes, 2017). Behaviors and actions are based on those that are exhibited by others in the person's social circle. (Maskaly & Donner, 2015). Researchers use social learning theory to understand the combination of an individual's background and experiences applied to the environment in which they live (Heyes, 2017).

In the research question, I evaluate the experiences of noncustodial fathers previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program. Through social learning theory, I conducted an analysis to determine if the outcome could be related to either an individual or a group of situations (Heyes, 2017).

### **Social Implications of Noncustodial Parents Not Paying Child Support**

Legislators view child support as a means of improving the likelihood of families coming out of poverty (Morduch & Siwicky, 2017). When addressing the issue of

uncollected child support, attention must be placed on how efficient the processes are that govern the collection of child support payments (Natalier & Hewitt, 2014). Consistent child support payments can improve the economic conditions for families if the amount is comparable to the expenses needed to accommodate the daily expenses (Harris, 2015). Without the collection of child support in 2017, the percentage of children living in poverty in the United States increased by 4.4% nationally (Baughman, 2017).

When considering the role of a responsible father, one theme that continued to emerge is the need for both financial and emotional support (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2018). In 2012, a comprehensive review was conducted by the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement to examine child support delinquency in the nine most significant states in the United States (Keyes, 2018). The findings indicated that the highest amount of delinquency was among noncustodial parents who had little to no income, and they also owed at least 50% of the total amount of arrears (Keyes, 2018). In 1966, changes were made to public policy with the adoption of the PRWORA. The goal of PRWORA was to increase the involvement of noncustodial parents in the lives of their children while also revamping the welfare system (Morduch & Siwicki, 2017).

PRWORA placed a requirement for states to review their processes and implement revised procedures that lead to increases in child support collections (Morgan, 2008). Other provisions of PRWORA included replacing Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with TANF (Martin & Caminada, 2016).



In the court system, there appears to be confusion between the deadbeat dad who is viewed as an individual who can pay but refuses to pay and the noncustodial parent who does not pay because they are unable to (Haney, 2018). In 1998, a new enforcement tool was introduced by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement entitled The Deadbeat Parents Punishment Act (Haskins, 2017). The terms of the act indicated that if a noncustodial parent owed child support of \$5,000 or if a child support obligation remained delinquent for over a year, the obligor could be incarcerated for at least six months (Haskins, 2017).

### **Evolution of Child Support Programs**

During the 1950s, the obligation to provide child support was viewed as an expectation for both the mother and the father (Morgan, 2008). Increases in divorce rates, cohabitation, and children born out of wedlock resulted in changes to the family structure (Martin, Ryan, Riina & Brooks-Gunn, 2017). An increased need in families for government assistance was also realized, which resulted in the introduction of the Food Stamp Program in 1961, Medicare and Medicaid in 1965 and Supplemental Security Income in 1971 (Morgan, 2008).

In 1974, the Family Support Act (FSA) was enacted, which resulted in shifting the responsibility to care for families from taxpayers to parents (Morgan, 2008). The FSA included a requirement for states to enforce and establish child support orders if they were receiving AFDC funds (Morgan, 2008). The original goal of AFDC was to provide financial resources to single parents with low income (Martin & Carminada, 2016).

TANF was more restrictive and emphasized gainful employment and the collection of child support since the benefits were time-limited (Martin & Caminada, 2016).

States that failed to comply with the terms of the new TANF policy were at risk of losing federal funding (Harris, 2017). Child support orders established the amount of the legal and financial obligations that noncustodial parents were required to pay (Solomon-Fears, 2016). To ensure that uniform child support awards were established, the United States Congress approved the FSA of 1988 (Turner & Waller, 2017). The FSA provided general guidance to assist state agencies in developing numerical guidelines to establish child support obligations (Turner & Waller, 2017). Several noncustodial parents faced significant challenges when trying to fulfill their commitments due to limited financial resources (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Researchers rarely examined the perspectives of the noncustodial parents since they expected them to pay their child support obligations regardless of their challenges (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015).

The Federal Child Support Agency was established in 1975 to pursue the collection of child support payments from noncustodial parents to reimburse both federal and state agencies for providing public assistance to families (Solomon-Fears, 2016). The original intent was to collect as much delinquent child support debt as possible (Bogges, 2017). The federal government also mandated that all states establish child support guidelines and incorporate enforcement procedures to ensure that the support was collected (Morgan, 2008). The services offered by child support agencies include locating parents, paternity testing, establishment and enforcement of child support orders,

collection and distribution of child support payments and review and modification of orders when financial circumstances change for either parent (Solomon-Fears, 2016).

When the child support agency was initially established, the economic circumstances of the noncustodial parents who are obligated to pay support were not taken into consideration (Boggess, 2017). There was an assumption by Congress that by establishing an order for the absent parents to pay child support, it would motivate them to pursue suitable employment to pay their obligations (Boggess, 2017). The federal Office of Child Support Enforcement took initiatives to strengthen the authority of local child support agencies by enacting legislation that gave them more power to enforce child support obligations (Solomon-Fears, 2016).

New legislation was adopted that made it more challenging for noncustodial parents to neglect their child support orders without having negative consequences (Haskins, 2017). Beginning in 1989, the federal government required states to review their guidelines every four years to ensure that child support orders were calculated correctly (Baughman, 2017). States could choose to establish child support obligations based on the noncustodial parent's income or use a shared revenue model (Solomon-Fears, 2016). In the shared revenue model, the income for both the custodial and noncustodial parents are taken into consideration (Solomon-Fears, 2016).

PRWORA was passed in 1996 and included legislation to replace AFDC with TANF (Wu, Fraser, Chapman, Gao, Huang & Chowa, 2018). Initially, PRWORA was well received, since single parents gained employment, and the number of families living

in poverty decreased (Danziger, Danziger, Seefeldt & Shaefer, 2016). There was also an expectation from Congress that by placing more pressure on the Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement to establish more robust policies to enforce collections, they would reduce the reliance on public assistance benefits for single-parent households (Morgan, 2008).

Despite the tools and enforcement policies that are available to child support agencies, the issue of unpaid child support continues to receive attention on both a national and international level (Haskins, 2017). As of fiscal year 2015, over \$28.6 billion was collected in child support payments nationally, which represented only 65% of the amount that was due (Solomon-Fears, 2016). Despite the efforts made to address the amount of delinquent child support on a state and national level, the debt remains startling (Turner & Waller, 2017). New initiatives such as most wanted posters and social media postings were introduced to force noncustodial parents to pay their obligation or risk the embarrassment of being incarcerated (Haney, 2018).

### **Impact of Incarceration on Noncustodial Fathers**

With the increased focus on enforcing delinquent child support obligations, alternatives for child support agencies to incarcerate noncustodial parents for nonpayment are included in state law (Western & Smith, 2018). When noncustodial parents are incarcerated, the child support delinquency amount continues to increase (Keyes, 2018). The average amount of child support that is owed by each incarcerated noncustodial parent is \$10,000 (Roman & Link, 2015). When an indigent person is imprisoned for

nonpayment of child support, it reflects a failure of the child support system since it is ineffective in generating increased child support payments (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2018). This process also contributes to the noncustodial parent being absent from the life of their children (Block et al., 2014).

The policies that encourage parental involvement with children are in direct conflict with those governing incarceration for nonpayment of child support (Roman & Link, 2015). This can also harm the relationship between the absent parent, custodial parent, and the children (Haney, 2018). During incarceration, noncustodial parents accrue substantial arrears balances, which gives them a greater incentive to avoid the child support system once they are released (Roman & Link, 2015). Once an individual is incarcerated, their prospects for stable and consistent employment drastically decrease since a criminal background can limit the opportunities that are available to them (Haney, 2018). During and after incarceration, inadequate financial resources can contribute to instability in the home for the children (Haney, 2018). Additionally, noncustodial parents may lose their housing and transportation while incarcerated (Western & Smith, 2018).

### **Custodial vs. Noncustodial Parent**

Over the last several years, laws were passed on both the federal and state levels that require child support programs to adopt more rigorous processes to increase the collection of child support (Solomon-Fears, 2016). For child support to have a positive impact, it must be received regularly by the custodial parent (Harris, 2017). When the custodial parent is left with the additional burden of trying to handle both the financial

and emotional support for the child, it can result in added stress to an already cumbersome existence (Barone, 2016). TANF benefits are available through child welfare agencies to provide financial resources to custodial parents in low-income families (Martin & Caminada, 2016). When custodial parents receive TANF benefits, federal law requires them to also cooperate with child support agencies to establish an order for the noncustodial parent to pay child support (Solomon-Fears, 2016).

There are federal laws that require child support agencies to establish guidelines to calculate the actual amount that the noncustodial parent is required to pay in child support (Baughman, 2017). Unfortunately, child support agencies do not consistently update their guidelines as required by law (Baughman, 2017). There are cases where the child support order is established based on the noncustodial parent's income only, without considering the income earned by the custodial parent (Ellman, 2014).

Many of the noncustodial parents who are currently ordered to pay child support have meager income with limited financial resources (Baughman, 2017). The perspective of the noncustodial parent regarding their financial struggle of supporting themselves is usually not taken into consideration when establishing child support obligations (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). When faced with the challenge of paying child support on a limited income, noncustodial parents are not as likely to pay (Morduch & Siwicki, 2017). As the accumulation of arrears continues to increase nationally, child support agencies must focus on the reasons why noncustodial parents fail to pay child support regularly (Keyes, 2018). One of the findings indicated that most of the arrears are owed by ten percent of

the noncustodial parents on the child support caseload (Keyes, 2018). An additional finding was that the noncustodial parents were either unemployed or underemployed (Solomon-Fears, 2016). To assist noncustodial parents who face challenges in paying their child support, Fatherhood Programs were developed to address the ongoing barriers realized when attempting to increase their opportunities to become self-sufficient (Pruett et al., 2017).

### **Fatherhood Programs**

There is currently no law that requires noncustodial parents to be involved in their children's lives (Barone, 2016). Community-based programs have been instrumental in increasing the likelihood of fathers being more active in their children's lives (Schepard & Emery, 2015). There is a correlation between consistent child support payments and father-child contact since fathers are motivated to pay when they are active in the lives of their children (Weiner, 2016).

Fatherhood Programs have been instrumental in promoting parental involvement for noncustodial parents in the lives of their children (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Many of the programs provide parenting classes that encourage healthy relationships between noncustodial parents and children (Baker, Sanders, Turner & Morawska, 2017). An additional benefit of Fatherhood Programs is to help low-income participants to become financially responsible (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). The target groups for Fatherhood Programs are typically noncustodial fathers with limited financial resources (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2018).

As of 2014, in collaboration with child support agencies nationwide, there were at least 77 different Fatherhood Programs established throughout the United States (Dion et al., 2015). One of the goals of Fatherhood Programs is to increase the likelihood of noncustodial parents being able to pay their child support by improving their earning potential with the assistance of employment services (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2018). An analysis was conducted on several Fatherhood Programs to examine programmatic guidelines, enrollment criteria, and the number of participants that complete the program (Boggess, 2017).

One of the concerns reported was a low completion rate by noncustodial parents while enrolled in Fatherhood Programs (Baker et al., 2017). There was an expectation that the relationship with their children would improve as a result of participating in Fatherhood Programs (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2018). Unfortunately, the relationships with their children did not improve in some of the cases (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2018). Another concern was that some of the participants expressed concerns with the program being categorized as a Fatherhood Program rather than also having a motherhood or parenthood component (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2018). An additional concern was that more attention should be paid to assisting low-income noncustodial parents in becoming financially self-sufficient (Pearson, 2015).

The Georgia Fatherhood Program was established in 1997 as a collaborative effort between Child Support Enforcement (CSE), the Department of Technical and Adult Education (DTAE), and the Department of Human Resources (DHR) (Georgia



Division of Child Support Services, 2016). The initial goal of the program was to provide job placement, training, and educational resources to noncustodial parents who were either unemployed or underemployed (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2016). The program connects participants with resources to assist them in becoming financially self-sufficient (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2016). During the federal fiscal year 2015, there were a total of 5,848 noncustodial parents enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2016). Of the 5,848 enrollees in the Georgia Fatherhood Program, only 1,617 participants completed the program (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2016). For a noncustodial father to complete the program, they will need to complete the 6-month enrollment period and comply with the requirement to either enroll in a technical school or gain full-time employment (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2016). The remaining 4,231 participants were removed since they did not comply with the terms and conditions (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2016).

### **Summary**

Despite the federally mandated enforcement tools, the child support delinquency amount in the state of Georgia has increased to over \$2 billion since 2016 (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2016). To improve the amount of child support collections, child support programs need to focus on why support is not collected consistently (Solomon-Fears, 2016).

A review of the literature provided analysis regarding why the child support agency was created in addition to the impact on noncustodial parents who are incarcerated for nonpayment of child support. The political implications of noncustodial parents not paying child support, and the economic impact of families having to apply for public assistance was also reviewed. An analysis was provided regarding the Georgia Fatherhood Program and additional Fatherhood Programs in other states. The purpose of this study was to determine the experiences of the noncustodial fathers previously enrolled in the program regarding their ability to complete the program.

Additionally, a review was conducted to determine how their experiences contributed to the low completion rate for enrollees. This research was unique because it addressed the existing gap in the literature on the low completion rates of noncustodial parents enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. The research also placed a focus on the experiences of noncustodial parents who were enrolled in Fatherhood Programs. The results of this study will provide much-needed insight into the barriers that contribute to low completion rates in the Fatherhood Program. Researching the experiences of noncustodial fathers previously enrolled in the program, regarding their ability to complete the program may provide useful insight to make changes in the program. Additionally, child support staff may also gain needed insight on how to encourage noncustodial parents to be more successful while enrolled in the Fatherhood Program.

## **Conclusion**

While much research has been conducted on the impact of child support delinquency, very little focus was placed on the challenges noncustodial parents face when dealing with limited financial resources and the legal obligation to pay child support. The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the experiences of the noncustodial fathers previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program. This research also provided an analysis of the Georgia Fatherhood Program to evaluate the procedures used to provide employment referral assistance, educational assessments, and job training to noncustodial parents who are referred from local child support offices with the Georgia Division of Child Support Services. The study focused on the perceptions of noncustodial fathers regarding their ability to complete the program.

## Chapter 3: Research Design

### **Introduction**

The methodology for this research was a generic qualitative research design. Through qualitative research, researchers analyze the different perspectives of the participants by focusing on the context from which their views may emerge (Daher, Jaramillo, Olivares & Tomicic, 2017). The purpose of the research was to understand the experiences of noncustodial fathers who were previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program.

In this chapter, I focused on the methodology to use in the study. It was essential to consider the philosophical foundations that support different paradigms to determine the most appropriate qualitative research method. Through qualitative methodology, researchers can examine significant problems while working with practitioners to discover possible resolutions (Kozleski, 2017). In this chapter, I will provide the justification and rationale for choosing the generic research design. I will also include a description of the research design, the reasoning behind the selected methodology, potential conflicts and biases, ethical considerations, participants and sample, instrumentation, data collection techniques, data management and analysis techniques, data interpretation, verification of trustworthiness/authenticity, and the role of the researcher.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research question that guided this study is as follows:

What were the experiences and perceptions of noncustodial fathers who participated in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program?

### **Rationale for the Qualitative Methodology**

The research problem determines the specific focus of the research study (Yates & Leggett, 2016). My objective in conducting the research was to understand the experiences of noncustodial fathers enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. I focused on the experiences and perceptions of noncustodial fathers regarding their ability to complete the program. When determining the type of methodology to use in conducting research, a researcher must decide which approach will provide the best answer for the research questions (Yates & Leggett, 2016).

The two primary research methodologies used in social sciences are quantitative and qualitative research (Smith, 2017). The type of research methodology used should be determined based on the research questions that will be answered (Smith, 2017). In qualitative studies, researchers focus on the perspectives of the participants, while quantitative analysis considers a cause-effect relationship (Smith, 2017). Through qualitative methodology, I researched the Georgia Fatherhood Program since it provided the experiences and perspectives of participants (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017).

Qualitative methodologies are used to advance and shape other levels of research on a given topic (Kozleski, 2017). Qualitative research is also instrumental in assisting the audience in expanding their knowledge base through practice and scientific discovery

(Kozleski, 2017). Qualitative research encompasses a wide range of phenomena in social sciences (Daher, Jaramillo & Olivares et al. (2017). Qualitative research is unique in that it allows the researcher to focus on both how and why a phenomenon happened (Yates & Leggett, 2016). In qualitative research, researchers can explore the lived experiences of the participants in the research study (Tuval-Maschaich, 2017).

### **Role of the Researcher**

In the analysis of the data, I evaluated the experiences of the participants to understand better the reasons why noncustodial fathers completed the Fatherhood Program. This process included a review of the experiences of noncustodial fathers during enrollment in the program. By evaluating the perspectives provided by participants, I formulated narratives based on their experiences in conducting research (Smith, 2017). Depending on their level of familiarity with the given research topic, researchers must remain objective throughout the study (Yates & Leggett, 2016).

As an employee with the Georgia Division of Child Support Services (DCSS) and as the assistant deputy director of state operations, I was responsible for monitoring the performance of child support collections on an ongoing basis to identify trends. When noncustodial fathers express an interest in voluntarily participating in the Georgia Fatherhood Program, they are required to attend an initial orientation. Fatherhood agents facilitate the orientations and have the responsibility of managing their assigned caseloads (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2017). Before the orientations, I contacted the Fatherhood Agents to advise them that I would attend the sessions as a

Walden University doctoral student. I emailed the flyers to them to display during the orientation session.

The participants knew my status as a child support employee when I attended the Fatherhood Orientation Sessions as a Walden doctoral student. I advised the child support staff that I was on approved leave from work and was not serving in my official capacity as a child support employee. I used the purposeful sampling method and posted flyers throughout the agency. The flyers provided noncustodial fathers with an opportunity to participate in the study voluntarily. Fatherhood Staff advised the noncustodial fathers who were interested in attending that I was available after the orientation sessions to meet with them briefly and explain the study. The participants were selected on a first-come, first-serve basis. Once I identified 10 participants who met the inclusion criteria, confidential interviews were set up. I gave the participants a \$20.00 gift card as a “thank you” for participating in the research study after they completed the interviews.

The qualitative interview is an interaction between the interviewer and participant and can affect the quality of the presented information. I watched several videos and reviewed multiple resources on previous qualitative interviews. As the researcher, I was the instrument; therefore, the potential to influence the collection of the data is present (Kozleski, 2017). During the research study, I conducted semistructured interviews.

### **Potential Conflicts and Biases**

One potential conflict that existed was the fact that I was an employee of the Georgia Division of Child Support Services who served in a leadership role with the

division. The Georgia Division of Child Support Services offered the Fatherhood Program to noncustodial fathers, but it was not within my area of supervision. Before researching this topic, I contacted the Institutional Review Board at Walden University to discuss potential conflicts and ways to alleviate those issues.

Because the Georgia Fatherhood Program reported directly to the service delivery manager and was not within my area of supervision, it was appropriate for me to complete research on this focus area. I included a draft copy of the Letter of Permission to Conduct Research (see Appendix A). It was submitted to the director and the legal department for review and approval. As a result, I had no role in identifying or influencing participants assigned to the Fatherhood Program. I provided an update to the Fatherhood staff regarding the purpose of the research study. I also explained my role as a researcher only and advised them that I was not serving in a leadership capacity while conducting my research on the Georgia Fatherhood Program.

As an individual that has worked in the field of social services for the past 25 years, I am very passionate about being able to empower individuals. I also enjoy being able to educate individuals on resources that are available in the community that can provide assistance to improve their situations. As a qualitative researcher, it was essential for me not to allow my feelings to taint my judgment when conducting research (Yates & Leggett, 2016). Through reflexive journaling and member checking, I ensured objectivity throughout the study (Yates & Leggett, 2016).



### **Ethical Considerations**

Research needs to be systematically sound to ensure the dignity and respect of participants throughout the study (Shake, 2015). The participants in the study were noncustodial fathers who had open cases with the Georgia Division of Child Support Services. They also had a legal obligation to pay child support. I excluded personal identifying information to ensure that the identity of the participants remained confidential. I assigned a numerical code to each participant. This code was not easily recognizable and did not reveal the identity of the participant.

It is also vital for researchers to ensure that a potential conflict of interest does not exist when serving as both a researcher and an employee of the agency where the participants have cases (Connelly, 2014). Researchers need to remain transparent in qualitative research because transparency is a critical component (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017). I posted flyers throughout the agency to allow noncustodial fathers to participate in the research study voluntarily. I scheduled interviews at the local library in a private room to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. I told the potential participants that I was a child support employee.

### **Participants and Sample**

The target population was noncustodial fathers who were previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program within the past year. It included fathers who either completed or did not complete the program. The ages of the participants were 24–56. The design of this study consisted of interviewing 10 participants or until I achieved

saturation. Through qualitative research and the recommendation to select a sample size of at least 10–12 participants, this sample size was chosen (Kozleski, 2017).

When determining the sample size, researchers consider saturation to ensure that the research is credible (Van Rijnsoever, 2017). According to Nelson (2017), for the results of a study to have complexity, saturation must be achieved. Saturation is the process of analyzing the study to determine the repetition of themes and patterns with no new data emerging (Nelson, 2017). The criteria that participants met was that they were noncustodial fathers who had a court order wherein they were required to pay child support in Georgia. They were also delinquent in their child support payments.

### **Instrumentation**

There were approximately 1,500 noncustodial fathers that participated in the Fatherhood Program in Georgia on an annual basis. I attended meetings, posted flyers, and eliminated participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria after the initial interview. Participants are required to attend accountability sessions once they enroll in the Fatherhood Program (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2017). The study included noncustodial fathers who either completed or did not complete the program. Some noncustodial fathers utilized the Fatherhood Program to delay enforcement of their child support order. During enrollment, noncustodial fathers had the opportunity to pay a reduced amount of child support. If noncustodial fathers did not complete the Fatherhood Program during their initial enrollment, they had a chance to re-enroll after a 60-day waiting period. Additionally, once noncustodial parents completed the Fatherhood

Program, they could re-enroll if they required more assistance with obtaining educational resources or employment.

Once I identified participants for the research, I verified that the participants met the established inclusion criteria. Interviews were scheduled and conducted at the convenience of the participant. I reviewed the informed consent criteria with the participants and had them sign the document. I advised participants that the interview was recorded and that they could stop the meeting at any time. I scheduled meetings based on the noncustodial father's geographic location. I conducted interviews at the local library in an enclosed space to ensure confidentiality with the noncustodial parent. I focused the interviews with participants on their individual experiences in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. I allowed 60–90 minutes for each meeting.

### **Data Collection Techniques**

The data collection process in qualitative research includes questions that are open-ended to ensure that the most detailed information was obtained (Yates & Leggett, 2016). There are different methods utilized in qualitative research to collect data, including observations, focus groups, interviews, assessments, and case studies (Kozleski, 2017). I analyzed the perspectives of noncustodial fathers who participated in the program.

I posted flyers and had potential participants reach out to me to ensure that no perception of coercion is perceived. I submitted a request for permission to conduct research to Tangler Gray, Director of Georgia Child Support Services, and approval was

received (see Appendix A). Flyers were also posted in the Fatherhood Orientation to advise possible participants of the research study and my contact information.

When fathers initially enrolled in the Fatherhood Program, they were required to attend an orientation session. Fatherhood staff conducted orientations at either a local library, employment office, or a local child support office. The staff scheduled orientation sessions every month. To determine which sessions to attend, I reviewed the monthly calendar for each location. I visited several meetings throughout the state to recruit participants to ensure that I interviewed enough individuals for the research study.

For the research study, I scheduled meetings with the participants in a private room at the local library. I provided a brief overview of the study to the participants before the interview took place. During the meeting, I presented opportunities to provide clarity and withdraw without penalty.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Qualitative research studies are used to analyze, collect, and interpret data that naturally occurs (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie & Manning, 2016). In qualitative research, the data collection protocols include developing a strategy, identifying the population for the research study, and obtaining data in a reproducible manner (Ranney, 2015). To determine the outcome of the research, the researcher should analyze the data (Mayer, 2015).

I used thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns in the research data (Miller, 2016). The steps included reading and listening, open coding/grouping the data

by themes, and discerning potential themes (Miller, 2016). I recorded and manually transcribed the interviews. To ensure that I thoroughly analyzed the recorded interviews, I reviewed the notes when listening to the recordings. This process assisted me in ensuring that all communication with the participants were thoroughly documented (Miller, 2016). During the member checking process, I provided detailed notes with each participant. This process included any observations made during the interview sessions.

I combined and saved all interview notes as an electronic file upon completion of the data collection. I password protected the electronic record. I stored the data in a secure filing system for five years. I based the timeframe on the requirements that are established for the Georgia Division of Child Support Services regarding case management data. It is critical for the researcher not to create any assumptions or generalizations based on the interview results (Pettica-Harris, DeGama & Elias, 2016).

### **Coding**

To gain a deeper understanding of the data, researchers can use qualitative research methods (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). Qualitative researchers can use open-ended surveys, interviews, and focus groups to gather research data from participants (Mayer, 2015). Researchers can face challenges with organizing, analyzing, and managing the data once it is captured (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). Coding is needed to simplify the process of analyzing the data (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). Coding is utilized to organize the data by reoccurring themes (Mayer, 2015).

Researchers use several types of software to analyze the research data to include ATLAS.ti and NVIVO. Most qualitative research studies that use ATLAS.ti and NVIVO are health care research studies (Mayer, 2015). Since this research focused on a human service topic, I considered using MAXQDA. This data analysis software is commonly used when analyzing interview responses using a descriptive analysis technique (Eladi & Yeliyurt, 2017).

### **Data Interpretation**

Careful research recognizes the value of generalizability while seeking to understand the concepts through observation (Kozleski, 2017). In the process of analyzing the data, I remained objective while trying to determine what the data was telling me about the experiences of noncustodial fathers while enrolled in the Fatherhood Program. For the research to be valid, I was unable to bring my preconceived ideas as an employee of the Division of Child Support Services into the study. To control for bias, I utilized member checking and peer debriefing of my analysis and interpretation.

After working in social services for the past 25 years, I had some ideas about what I thought the results would indicate. My thoughts relied on my historical knowledge of noncustodial fathers who were previously ordered to pay child support. I utilized reflexive journaling and peer debriefing to ensure objectivity throughout the study.

### **Verification of Trustworthiness/Authenticity**

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the research using a generic qualitative approach, it must be credible, confirmable, dependable, and transferable (Kozleski,

2017). The research is trustworthy if individuals that have had similar experiences as those included in the study can connect with the findings realized during the research (Kozleski, 2017). The researcher should provide details on how the data is collected to ensure the research is confirmable (Yates & Leggett, 2016).

By ensuring that duplicate conditions continue with each study participant, the researcher establishes dependability (Kozleski, 2017). For this research study, I used a private room at the local library to meet with the participants. I advised the participants that I would not use identifying information. I also informed them that I would assign a number and demographic information only. I determined and followed the interview protocol for each participant by ensuring that I asked the same questions for each participant in the same order. The qualitative study usually is transferable when the same set of conditions applies to a different population of participants with the same background as those in the study group (Cope, 2014). For this research study, the information was not transferable to any other group. The participant's experiences were individual and applicable only to their situation and location.

### **Establishing Credibility and Reliability**

Since I was an employee with the Division of Child Support Services, it was essential to have an outside person to build credibility and reliability in the study. For this research study, I received confirmation from Dr. Erica Atkins, Director of the Office of Enterprise Development with the Georgia Department of Human Services. Dr. Atkins was previously employed as the Training Director with the Georgia Division of Child

Support Services from 2013–2016. She earned a Doctor of Business Administration from Argosy University's College of Business. She also earned a Master of Business Administration from Strayer University and a Bachelor of Science in Managerial Science from Georgia State University.

Since Dr. Atkins is an expert in human services, she reviewed the research findings and provided feedback based on her experiences with noncustodial fathers. Her assessment assured that there was no researcher bias. She also checked my findings to ensure that my personal beliefs and experiences had not filtered into my analysis. Utilizing outside peer debriefing also ensures that the results are not skewed either for or against the proposed research questions (Kozleski, 2017).

### **Validity Threats**

The validity of the data was critical when conducting research. There are various challenges to validity in qualitative research approaches to include inductive, deductive, and abductive (Graneheim, Lindgren & Lundman, 2017). Since the inductive method tries to identify patterns in the research findings, I needed to ensure that I did not make assumptions based on reoccurring responses (Graneheim et al., 2017). If assumptions were made based on the research, it could present a threat to validity.

Since the deductive approach examines whether there are existing theories that may skew the data in one direction or another, it was vital for me to review the interview results for each participant individually (Graneheim et al., 2017). By grouping the interview results based on existing theories, it could have presented a threat to validity.



There was an additional threat that the results were not believable based on my previous exposure to noncustodial fathers in the Child Support program. To minimize doubt, I provided clarity on the procedures used to collect the research data (Kozleski, 2017).

I established an audit trail to ensure that every participant received the same number of questions asked in the same order. Additionally, the second level of review was conducted by Dr. Erica Atkins to ensure that the identified participants were from the same report based on the established criteria. This review brought additional validity to the research and provided a check and balance system in case there were any questions raised regarding the findings (Yates & Leggett, 2016). I provided a copy of the interview questions in Appendix C.

### **Data Confidentiality**

Since the research includes noncustodial fathers that currently have child support cases, there are federal requirements regarding confidentiality. Under the federal code of regulations (Title 42 CFR), there are concrete guidelines on when information can be shared (McCarty, Rieckmann, Baker, et al., 2016). Any personal identifying information was removed from the noncustodial fathers to ensure confidentiality. To maintain the integrity of the data, I assigned a number for participants as a reference to the demographic data.

### **Follow up Counseling**

There are community service providers available in each city where a child support office was located. In collaboration with the Georgia Fatherhood Program and

Parental Accountability Courts, follow-up counseling is possible for noncustodial fathers as needed. The agencies that agreed to assist participants in the metro-Atlanta area included Community Action Center, Action Ministries Atlanta, Connection Point Church of God, and Atlanta Work Force Development.

### **Summary of Research Design**

I analyzed data in the qualitative research study related to the experiences of noncustodial fathers in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. The analysis included research in determining the reasons noncustodial fathers did or did not complete the Georgia Fatherhood Program. The generic qualitative approach was the appropriate research study to determine the experiences and perspectives of noncustodial fathers regarding their ability to complete the Fatherhood Program.

It was also essential to decide on the different forces that contributed to the realized findings. When using this approach, researchers can make assumptions to determine if there were positive or negative contributors to the study group (Swanson & Creed, 2014). Researchers are also able to analyze suggested changes based on the influence of the external and internal environment (Alexandra, Gianita, Florinda & Valter, 2017).

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to determine the experiences of the noncustodial fathers previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program. In this chapter, I discuss the data collection process and share the results of the data analysis. The research question that guided this study was as follows:

What were the experiences and perceptions of noncustodial fathers who participated in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program?

In Chapter 4, I provide data collection and analysis of information from the generic qualitative study. I collected data for the research by gathering demographic information on the participants, conducting semistructured interviews, transcribing the data, and coding the transcripts to determine emergent themes. Through thematic analysis, I identified themes and patterns in the research data (Miller, 2016). I describe the strategies utilized to ensure credibility and dependability. I include a summary of significant findings related to the research question at the end of Chapter 4.

### **Research Setting**

I conducted the scheduled interviews in a private room at local libraries throughout Georgia. I selected the libraries based on each participant's geographic location. I chose the setting to ensure confidentiality, so participants would feel

comfortable providing honest feedback to the interview questions. I presented a brief overview of the study to the participants before completing each interview. Before starting the meeting, each of the participants read and signed the informed consent form. I conducted the interviews between April 10–27, 2019. I recorded the discussions to ensure accurate transcription. The average length of the meetings was 40 minutes.

### **Demographics**

The recruitment efforts produced a total of 10 men previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. Table 1 highlights the demographic information of the participants, which includes ethnicity, education level, employment status, child support status, and whether arrears were owed. All participants self-identified as African-American men who were between the ages of 24 and 56 years old. Each participant had between one and five children. The inclusion criteria for all participants were as follows: (a) noncustodial fathers who completed the Fatherhood Program, (b) over the age of 21 years, (c) open court order to pay child support, and (d) delinquent in their child support payments.

Table 1

*Details of Participants Demographic Information*

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	# Children	Education	Employed	Child Support Order	Arrears
Arthur	48	African American	4	Some college	Yes	Yes	Yes
John	43	African American	1	GED	Yes	Yes	Yes
Brian	56	African American	3	Doctorate	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gerald	35	African American	4	GED	Yes	Yes	Yes
Charles	34	African American	3	Associate's	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sylvester	24	African American	1	Some college	Yes	Yes	Yes
David	47	African American	3	Some college	Yes	Yes	Yes
Eric	50	African American	5	Bachelor's	No	Yes	Yes
Kent	32	African American	5	12th	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hal	42	African American	3	High School	Yes	Yes	Yes

*Note.* Data for noncustodial parents who were previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program (2019).

### **Participants Using Pseudonyms**

#### **Arthur**

Arthur, age 48 years, reported that he has four children who range in age from 24 to 27 years. He described his role as a father as being there to provide for his children. His expectations regarding the Fatherhood Program were that it would be a quick fix for his child support case. He completed the program and was able to find a better paying job.

#### **John**

John, age 43 years, has one child that is 20 years old. He described his role of father as someone who is there to help direct his daughter by teaching her to avoid different pitfalls and to correct her when she is wrong. His expectation when joining the program was to get help with finding a job and prevent license suspension. He completed the program and received three different job opportunities.

#### **Brian**

Brian, age 56 years, has three children whose ages range in age from 7 to 15 years of age. He described his role as a father as doing everything that he could for his kids. His expectation when joining the program was that he would be able to get a job making close to his previous earnings as a veterinarian. As a convicted felon, he was no longer able to practice medicine. He completed the program and obtained a commercial driver's license. He was in the process of applying for jobs with commercial driving companies.

**Gerald**

Gerald, age 35 years, has four children who range in age from 15 to 21 years of age. He described his role as a father as being there when he could. Gerald did not have any expectations when joining the program and enrolled to prevent incarceration. He completed the program and was able to get his criminal record expunged.

**Charles**

Charles, age 34 years, has three children whose ages range from 6 to 14 years of age. He described his role of a father as being supportive, caring, and willing to do for his kids. His expectation when joining the program was to get a job. He completed the program and was able to obtain several job leads during his enrollment.

**Sylvester**

Sylvester, age 24 years, has one child who is six years old years of age. He described his role as a father as ensuring that he teaches his son about life and ensuring that he does his homework. The expectation when enrolling was that he would get visitation with his child. He completed the program and was able to obtain information on establishing visitation. He was also able to obtain a forklift certification.

**David**

David, age 47 years, has three children who range in age from 17 to 24 years of age. He described his role as a father as one who leads, guides, and instructs. His expectation when joining the program was that he would have access to unlimited

resources. He completed the program and was able to get his license reinstated. He also gained employment leads during his enrollment.

**Eric**

Eric, age 50 years, has five children who vary in age from ages from 14 to 28 years of age. He described his role as a father as knowing about different events that are going on with the children so he can attend. His expectation when joining the program was to gain permanent employment. He completed the program and found different avenues that were afforded to him to find the right career.

**Kent**

Kent, age 32, has five children whose ages range from 2 to 11 years of age. He described his role as a father as being there as much as possible. His expectation when joining the program was to be understood and to get help because fathers struggle when they are not able to pay child support and get their license suspended. He completed the program and was provided information on job fairs.

**Hal**

Hal, age 42, has three children who range in age from 12 to 16 years old. He described his role as a father as someone who leads by example by being decent, respectful, and respectable. His expectation when joining the program was to get support from community-based organizations. He completed the program and referenced the opportunity to train in different paths as a contributor to his success.



### **Data Collection**

I conducted a generic qualitative study with ten noncustodial fathers who were enrolled in the program during the years of 2018–2019. I posted flyers on the bulletin boards at each of the Fatherhood Orientation locations. Individuals who were interested in participating in this study contacted me by phone to schedule a meeting date and time. I verified the eligibility of the participants by utilizing predetermined inclusion before scheduling interviews. I conducted face to face interviews by using the established protocol. I asked follow-up questions whenever additional clarification was needed. This process ensured that detailed answers were provided to all interview questions. During the interviews, I observed body language, voice tone, and eye contact to determine if I needed to ask the questions differently. I used a digital voice recorder to record the interview responses. I reminded participants that they could discontinue the interview at any time. I also asked if they were comfortable proceeding with the session before starting the recording. All participants agreed to proceed with the recorded interview. The member checking process occurred after the meeting to gain clarity on any unclear responses.

The data collection process did not deviate from the plan that was presented in Chapter 3 and approved by the Walden University IRB (IRB approval number: 04-05-19-0306073). I manually transcribed within 3–5 days of each interview and saved as secure Microsoft word documents. To achieve saturation, I conducted interviews with a sample size of 10 participants. I continued to analyze the data until the resulting themes and

patterns were repetitive, with no new data emerging. Once saturation occurred, I discontinued the search for additional participants. I informed each participant that I would transcribe the recorded interviews. I gave a \$20 gift card as a thank you for participating.

### **Data Analysis**

My focus in the data analysis was to identify the noncustodial fathers' experiences and perceptions and the potential appearance of core themes during their enrollment in the Fatherhood Program. I used thematic analysis to identify themes and patterns from the participant's narratives. The data were then coded and grouped by themes (Miller, 2016). I recorded the interviews and manually transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were assigned to identify the responses for each participant. I then proceeded to review the recordings, transcripts, and field notes to gain an in-depth understanding of the participant's experiences and perceptions based on their responses to the interview questions. To ensure that I thoroughly analyzed the recorded interviews, I reviewed the transcripts while listening to the recordings. I used this process to assist me in ensuring that all communication with the participants was thoroughly documented (Miller, 2016). I read the transcripts several times and highlighted any recurring phrases and words in the interview transcripts. I organized the keywords and phrases into descriptive themes. After I identified the themes, the responses were coded based on the themes.

I used the following main categories to organize the participants' responses from the interviews: (a) impact of the program on perceptions of fatherhood, (b) expectations and experiences with Fatherhood Program, c) impact of Fatherhood Program on participants, and d) experiences with fatherhood representative. I combined all interview notes and saved as an electronic file once the data collection was complete. The electronic data is password protected and stored in a secure filing system where it will remain for 5 years.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness/Authenticity**

To ensure trustworthiness, I used methods to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Kozleski, 2017). I based the study results on accurate accounts that were provided by the participants in the interview responses and other data sources. I identified categories and themes that reflected the experiences and perceptions of noncustodial fathers who participated in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program. I utilized the criteria that were established in Chapter 3 to verify trustworthiness and authenticity.

### **Credibility (Internal Validity)**

According to Moon, Brewer, Januchowski-Hartley, Adams & Blackmon, (2016), credibility refers to ensuring that the research findings reflect the intended meaning of the participants. I achieved credibility by engaging the participants during interviews. I asked them to verify the provided responses. I asked the participants open-ended questions in the interview sessions, which resulted in comprehensive, detailed answers.

I utilized the member checking process to ensure that I captured their responses to the questions accurately. To ensure that I documented their intended responses, I provided copies of transcripts to participants for review. I also included direct quotes from the participants in the results section to support the research findings.

To further increase credibility, I utilized triangulation. I allowed another peer to review the findings of the research. Since I was an employee with the Georgia Department of Human Services during the interviews, Dr. Erica Atkins conducted a peer review of the research findings. She attested to whether the results accurately reflected what she, as a professional, would reasonably expect based on her experience. This process assured me that no researcher bias affected my conclusions. Dr. Erica Atkins is the Training Director of the Georgia Department of Human Services. She was previously employed with the Division of Child Support Services for 14 years and provided training to the Fatherhood Program Staff.

### **Transferability (External Validity)**

Transferability refers to the degree that the findings in the research study are useful to future research (Moon et al., (2016). I increased transferability by using thick descriptions to describe the results in an effort for other researchers to have the ability to utilize data in future research. I provided clarity on how I recruited the participants in addition to how data was analyzed, collected, and coded for other researchers to contrast the study to other research on similar topics.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the trustworthiness of the research findings (Farghaly, 2018). I provided information about the data collection approach that I used to recruit participants so that other researchers could easily use the same process. I completed data analysis reports in both Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word to support the research study. I organized audit trails of the interview notes, documents collected from the field, recordings, and other related documents to ensure dependability throughout the research study.

### **Confirmability**

To ensure confirmability, I listened to the interview recordings several times to ensure that I accurately recorded the participant's responses. I also reviewed the transcripts of the interviews with participants, interview notes, and recordings to ensure that I did not include my thoughts and beliefs. I ensured reflexivity by keeping notes during the data analysis process and data collection.

### **Data Analysis Findings**

The research question for this study was as follows:

What were the experiences and perceptions of noncustodial fathers who participated in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program?

I asked 17 questions of each participant during the interview to understand the experiences and perceptions that influenced their ability to complete the program. I

grouped the questions into the following four categories: (a) impact of the program on perceptions of fatherhood, (b) expectations and experiences with Fatherhood Program, c) impact of Fatherhood Program on participants, and d) experiences with fatherhood representative. The themes and subthemes are presented in Table 2 on the next page.

Table 2

*Theme Identification*

Categories	Major Themes	Subthemes
Impact of Program on Perceptions of Fatherhood	View of role as father	Being a provider Being supportive
	Meaning of Fatherhood	Having a relationship with children Being a better father
Expectations & Experiences with Fatherhood Program	Motivation to participate	Issues with paying child support Preventing driver's license suspense
	Expectations of program	Access to better jobs Personal visitation with children
	Things liked about program	Access to better opportunities Emotional support in understanding child support
	Things disliked about program	Fatherhood Program did not have any control over the regular child support case
	Most helpful information gained from program	Job opportunities Educational resources
	Elements that contributed to program completion	Guidance received from fatherhood staff Motivation to complete the program
	Impact of Fatherhood Program on Participants	Impact of program on behavior
Impact on feelings/actions regarding child support		Being about more than the money The importance of doing what needs to be done
Impact on feelings toward employment		Willingness to do something different Always remain positive
Impact on feelings toward education		Willingness to go beyond high school Being open to other opportunities
Experiences with Fatherhood Representative	Relationship to fatherhood representative	Communicating as needed Serving as a life coach
	Helpfulness of fatherhood representative	Providing encouragement Providing support
	Lack of help from fatherhood representative	Did not receive guidance during enrollment The representative was always helpful
	Recommended changes to the Fatherhood Program	Provide detailed guidance on the program requirements

### **Impact of Program on their Perceptions of Fatherhood**

Participants were asked two questions related to their perceptions of fatherhood. Those questions addressed their views of fatherhood and their perceptions of fatherhood. Themes related to each of the interview questions are presented in the paragraphs that follow.

**View of Role as Father.** When the participants were asked how they viewed their role as a father, responses included comments such as being a provider and being supportive. Arthur's comments regarding the role of a father best reflect the theme of a father being a provider for his children. Arthur described his role as a father as follows: "My role is to be there to provide for my children. This includes working and providing food, clothing, and shelter for them. It is a part of my lifestyle to give them a better life." Kent described that being a provider means that: "If you make kids take care of them. You should play the role and take care of your family by providing for them, being in their life, making sure they take the right path and providing for their needs."

The theme of being supportive emerged for questions relating to the role of a father and the meaning of fatherhood. The responses regarding being supportive were combined. Charles' comments on his views on the role of the father reflected the theme of being supportive. Charles described that being supportive of his children consisted of the following:

As a father, I am active, very supportive, caring, willing to do anything for my kids, so they're primary. I have three daughters, and I take them out on dates. We



hang out and go to the parks. I'm actively involved, and if I'm not with them, we communicate several times a week, depending on the situation.

Arthur indicated that to him, being supportive meant the following: "It means to be there for them; to teach them, train them, prepare them for the challenges of life and to help them overcome those challenges." Hal stated that being supportive means that, "Even if you're not with the other parent, making sure that your child is okay; healthy, happy, and doing everything needed."

**Meaning of Fatherhood.** When the participants were asked what the meaning of fatherhood was to them, there were different responses based on their individual experiences. The reactions included having a relationship with their children and being a better father. Brian's comments regarding the meaning of fatherhood best reflect the theme of having a relationship with children. Brian described the meaning of fatherhood as follows:

My daughter knows that I take care of her. Emotionally, I want to make sure she's okay so that she can function and have ethical, moral values. I want my kids to be able to come to me for anything.

Sylvester described having a relationship as follows: "You can see your children at least twice a week. I feel like you must be there and have a relationship. We do different activities so that he can have experiences with me."

The theme of being a better father also emerged when I asked participants about the meaning of fatherhood. When asked, Gerald presented his meaning of fatherhood as follows:

It means being a better father and living close to your children. They just want me to be around more. I was in prison for eight years and missed a lot. I can now be more hands-on with my child, and it makes me feel good.

Kent described being a better father with the following comments:

If I had the opportunity to be all that I want to be for my kids, it would look better than what's going on now. I try my best to do what I can. I don't want to tell my kids no. Someone had to take care of me; therefore, I should be able to play the role and take care of my family.

### **Expectations & Experiences with Fatherhood Program**

Participants were asked six questions that related to their expectations and experiences with the Fatherhood Program. Those questions addressed their motivation to participate, expectations of the program, things that they liked and disliked about the program, the most helpful information gained about the program, and what they felt helped them to complete the program. Themes related to each of the interview questions are presented in the paragraphs that follow.

**Motivation to Participate.** When the participants were asked about their motivation to participate in the Fatherhood Program, responses included comments such

as issues with paying their child support and preventing their driver's license from being suspended. Brian responded that he had issues with paying child support as follows:

They gave me the option because they were going to take my driver's license, and they said the only option that you have is to pay the child support or go to jail. They said you could go on the Fatherhood Program.

Eric's response also indicated issues with paying child support. He described his motivation to participate in the Fatherhood Program as follows:

I lost my job, and I called to tell them that I had to look for new work. The young lady over the phone, she explained to me, you probably want to do some research and join the Fatherhood Program. When she told me about it, I went online, and then I signed up.

The theme of preventing driver's license suspension emerged as motivation for some of the participants to enroll in the program. David noted the following: "I was about to lose my license, and I saw a flyer about the Fatherhood Program. I was also interested since it referenced job availability and license reinstatement."

**Expectations of the Program.** When participants were asked about their expectations when joining the Fatherhood Program, the two major themes were access to better jobs and personal visitation with their children. Arthur's comments regarding the expectations of the program reflect the theme of access to a better job. Arthur stated the following regarding his expectations of the Fatherhood Program:

Reading the pamphlet, I felt it was going to give me a better life so that I could provide more for my family. At the time, I was not making enough to be able to pay child support without sacrificing for myself. When I was reading the pamphlet, it advised me that I could get a better education and possibly a better job to make more money.

Eric noted that his expectation of the program was that it would result in gaining access to better jobs as follows: “I saw the Fatherhood Program as a path that I could use to change careers. I was looking for something more permanent than what I had been doing over the last 20 years.”

The theme of being able to gain personal visitation with their child surfaced as an expectation of the program. Kent’s comments regarding expectations of the program reflected that he was looking forward to obtaining personal visitation with his children. Kent responded as follows:

Sometimes, I might get to see my kids, and sometimes, I might not. It meant a lot to be understanding and try to help with fathers because they had it hard with not making payments and getting your license suspended. Maybe with the Fatherhood Program, you could talk to someone and expect that they would probably be able to help you out.

**Things Liked About Program.** When I asked the participants what they liked the most about the program, the primary themes were access to better opportunities and emotional support in understanding child support. Charles’ response regarding things

liked about the program indicated that he appreciated getting access to better opportunities.

Charles stated: What I liked most about the Fatherhood Program was it allowed us to search for jobs and do some things to get on your feet. Your license was not getting suspended if you were actively searching for jobs. It seemed like a lot of my leads for employment came from the Fatherhood Program.

The theme of emotional support in understanding child support became apparent based on the responses provided by participants. Gerald mentioned that he liked the Fatherhood Program based on the emotional support received in understanding child support.

Gerald noted: I did not previously like the Fatherhood Program until I enrolled the last time. When I left after the first day, my spirit was lifted. I could feel that they wanted to help me. There were encouraging notes in the email notifications. I have been through the program four times. This is the first time that the representative seemed to care about us and what we were going through.

Eric also commented on how much he liked the emotional support that he received in understanding child support during his enrollment in the Fatherhood Program.

Eric said:

The representative was very hands-on. He told us about his experience in going through a divorce, and he gave us examples of things that he did to make it through this time in his life. The most significant benefit for me was getting help

in dealing with the emotional stuff that comes with going through a divorce, and the transition to paying child support.

**Things Disliked About the Program.** When I asked the participants what they disliked about the program, the primary theme was that the Fatherhood Program did not have any control over the regular child support case. Brian discussed his experience in dealing with the child support case as one he disliked about the Fatherhood Program. Brian responded as follows: “Basically, the fact that they have no control. They can’t help you with the avenues that you need to get yourself straightened out with this whole department of child services fiasco.”

Charles also related his personal experience in dealing with the child support case as one item that he disliked about the Fatherhood Program. Charles noted: “What I like least about it is you're still building up arrears while you're in the program; nothing is waived, nothing just put on the back end or the front end of it.”

**Most Helpful Information Gained from the Fatherhood Program.** I asked participants about the most helpful information gained during enrollment in the Fatherhood Program. The two themes that surfaced as primary responses related to job opportunities and educational resources. Brian indicated that the most helpful information that he gained during his enrollment in the Fatherhood Program was the available job opportunities. Brian responded as follows:

I learned that I could work in another field, like truck driving. That's the best avenue they have for you to work as a truck driver, but it is still an option I had not considered. Truck driving is lucrative, and it allows you to better yourself.

Several of Eric's responses included positive comments related to the Fatherhood Program. He described the job opportunities as the most helpful information that he gained from the program. Eric stated:

Honestly, my instructor told me about the career path through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), and they assisted me in getting into trucking school to get my CDL. It was like \$5,000 that they paid for me to complete that program, which I've completed. So now, once I get my license, I'll have orientation at the trucking company. So, I didn't know anything about that. I thought about going to trucking school, but again, at \$5,000, it was going to be a problem. Going through the program, they paid for everything, and all I had to do was show up every day. It was beneficial to me.

The theme of access to educational resources surfaced as an additional theme when I asked participants about the most helpful information gained during enrollment in the Fatherhood Program. Sylvester referenced the access that he gained to educational resources and mentioned that it was the most beneficial information obtained during his enrollment in the program. Sylvester indicated:

I wanted to get a better job, and the representative told me that to get to the next level of employment, I would have to go back to school. When I told them that I

did not have the funds for it, they enrolled me in a program to get forklift certification, and the Fatherhood Program paid for it.

Hal advised that access to education resources was the most helpful information that he gained during his enrollment in the Fatherhood Program. Hal responded as follows: “There are so many educational resources to receive training in different career opportunities. You can only fail if you're not applying yourself. So that's why I feel like the wide range of job opportunities is a major advantage.”

**Elements That Contributed to Program Completion.** When I asked participants about the elements that contributed to them completing the program, two primary themes emerged from their responses. Those themes were guidance received from the Fatherhood staff and their motivation to complete the program. Gerald's comments regarding the guidance received from the Fatherhood staff indicated how that guidance contributed to him being successful. He stated the following regarding one staff member:

She was a people person, and she listened more than she talked. If I didn't have a ride, she planned for me to get there. She wanted to see me do good. I owe her my happiness right now because if it weren't for her, I would not have been successful.

Hal talked about the way the program was presented to him by the Fatherhood staff. After reflecting on his experience, he gave the following comments:



Everything was heartfelt. If we don't feel the connection to the honesty and sincerity of the situation, we wouldn't be successful. I feel like the design, and the mission statement behind the program was presented with a lot of integrity.

One additional theme emerged in response to the interview question about the elements that contributed to program completion. Participants referenced that their focus on being successful was a strong contributor to completing the program. David talked about how being focused contributed to him completing the program. David responded as follows: "I can say that going into the Fatherhood Program gave me the sound structure of wanting employment. I was focused on work after being incarcerated. The program geared my mind and propelled me in the right direction." Kent also discussed his focus on being successful as the element that contributed to him completing the Fatherhood Program. Kent stated: "I was focused on making a difference. I didn't like sitting around without having anything to do. I wanted a program that had actual jobs and not just possibilities."

### **Impact of Fatherhood Program on Participants**

Participants were asked four questions related to their perceptions of the impact of the Fatherhood Program during their enrollment. These questions addressed how their behaviors changed, how their feelings/actions regarding child support changed, and how their feelings regarding employment and education changed as a result of participating in the program. Themes related to each of the interview questions are presented in the paragraphs that follow.

**Impact of Program on Behavior.** When I asked participants how they have changed their behavior since being enrolled in the Fatherhood Program, responses included comments such as being more responsible and no change in behavior. John's comments regarding the impact of the Fatherhood Program on his behavior reflected the theme of being more responsible. John described the impact on his behavior as follows: "I am more responsible and accountable as a father. I must do my part by going to see my child and having conversations with her whenever I can. I also ensure that my child support payments are made promptly." Sylvester's comments around being more responsible also reflected the impact that the Fatherhood Program had on his behavior. Sylvester responded as follows:

Being in the Fatherhood Program and getting the resources I received made me want to do nothing but improve. When attending the meetings with the program, I would hear other guys talk about their situations. I decided that I wanted to be more responsible and take the steps needed to improve my situation so that I could provide a better life for my som. There's no going back, just improving.

Some participants responded that the Fatherhood Program did not have any impact on their behavior during their enrollment. Their responses reflected that there was no change in their behavior since their perspectives on being a father were established before enrolling. Arthur's comments regarding the program's impact on his behavior indicated that there was no change in his perspective. Arthur's response was as follows:

I can't say I changed my behavior as a father because I continue to do the same things that I did before enrolling in the Fatherhood Program. I understand the importance of being a good father and establishing a lifestyle to give them a better life.

**Impact on Feelings/Actions regarding Child Support.** When I asked participants how their feelings/actions regarding child support have changed since enrollment, responses included comments such as it being about more than the money to the importance of doing what needs to be done. David's reaction regarding the impact that the program had on his feelings/actions towards child support indicated that it was about more than the money. David commented as follows:

My take on child support has always been if the court mandates it, then I should pay it. I don't think child support can ever pay what a child is owed from the father. It takes more than that to raise a child. You have to also be active in the child's life.

Eric's response also indicated that the impact on his feelings/actions toward child support during enrollment was that it was about more than the money. Eric described his experience as follows:

When I got a divorce, I thought she would just put me on child support as another way to get back at me. Once I stepped back and looked at everything, I realized that my child's standard of living had changed. It's not his fault that things didn't work out for us. I had to look at it differently and realize that he still needed to

feel the same safety as going to school and getting grades that he felt when we were together as a family.

The theme regarding the importance of doing what needs to be done also emerged as having an impact on the feelings/actions regarding child support. Arthur responded regarding the importance of doing what needs to be done as follows:

Before, when I used to get letters, I would throw them away and not worry about it. Through the Fatherhood Program, I learned that this is a serious business. If I'm not taking care of them, my kids are losing if I'm not there taking care of something that I'm court ordered to do.

Sylvester also responded regarding how the Fatherhood Program has impacted his feelings/actions regarding child support. He indicated that he now understands the importance of doing what needs to be done in his response as follows:

The program helped me understand what child support was. I didn't care about child support and thought it was negative. The Fatherhood Program opened my mind and helped me understand how to start taking care of my child so that he could have a better life.

**Impact on Feelings Toward Employment.** When I asked participants how their feelings changed regarding employment, the primary themes were a willingness to do something different and always to remain positive. Arthur responded that he now has a desire to do something different as follows:

I have learned not to be satisfied with a specific type of job and to seek better employment and not just to be happy with a minimum wage job. My income has increased since enrolling in the Fatherhood Program. I do have a better job, and with the help of the Fatherhood Program, encouraging me to do better for myself, I have been able to get my place and not just live with my mother.

Brian's response regarding his feelings on employment indicated that he had to establish a willingness to do something different. He described his experience as follows:

I realize I have to do something out of my field. I had to come to grips with that. I was going to school for most of my life and then working in the same area. I was a veterinarian for 35 years. It was a little daunting to think that I would have to do something beneath me. So now I realize it's not about my ego and my pride it's just I've got to get a job.

Sylvester further responded as follows:

Last year, I took a leap faith. I was still working at my regular job serving, but I was like, I'm done serving. I want to give something else a try. With me, it was an excellent experience because I got to try out something different. It was amazing. I got a different experience because it opened many doors for me."

The theme of always remaining positive also surfaced regarding the impact of the program on employment. Gerald's reply reflected that he developed a positive attitude as follows:

I'm doing my own thing, and I feel good about it. I never had the experience of working for anyone because no one would give me a chance as a convicted felon. Once I was able to get my record expunged, I was able to start my own business. Everything is now lining up perfectly like, and I'm planning to add another shop on the side of my car washing business.

Charles reflected on how he always remains positive as a result of his experience regarding employment as follows:

I previously had my own company and decided to walk away from it. When I reached out to the Fatherhood Program, I was able to get a job at a lower salary than what I previously made. I put my pride aside and focused on what I needed to do since I had to take care of my kids. If you step out there and you continue to build on what you can do, you will eventually get an increase. Within the next five years, I will own several different companies since this is what I want to do. I will always remain positive.

**Impact on Feelings Regarding Education.** When I asked participants how their feelings regarding their education changed since participating in the Fatherhood Program, the primary themes were a willingness to go beyond a high school diploma and being open to other opportunities. Eric's response indicated that he now has a desire to go beyond a high school diploma. He noted the following:

You are never too old to learn. I'm starting a new career at 50, so I had to go back to school but, my business degree and my time in the car industry and dealing

with banks and dealing with contracts and stuff will help me out tremendously in the trucking industry.

Sylvester described the change in his willingness to go beyond a high school diploma as follows:

"The first time they put me in the certification class, I was excited about going back to school. When I did the first certification, it was the best thing that I could have ever done. I felt motivated to go beyond my high school diploma."

The additional theme of being open to other opportunities also emerged regarding their feelings toward education. Hal responded regarding being open to other opportunities as follows:

It changed in a significant way with opportunities in different fields. It just made me want to gain more knowledge in various areas to be able to pass down the expertise and information to my children. I got my CDL, so I do transportation. I'm also planning to enter landscaping, pressure washing, and I'll eventually get a truck. The more valuable you are, the more successful you are.

Arthur described how his feelings regarding his education have made him more open to other opportunities. He responded as follows:

I don't just have to have a high school diploma. I can better my education and go to college or technical school since there are many opportunities in the Fatherhood Program. I like computers, so I was able to get a job working with a computer company.

### **Experiences with Fatherhood Representative**

Participants were asked four questions related to their experiences with the fatherhood representative during their enrollment. These questions addressed their relationship with their assigned representative, the helpfulness of the representative, the lack of help from the representative, and what they would change about the Fatherhood Program. Themes related to each of the interview questions are presented in the paragraphs that follow.

**Relationship to Fatherhood Representative.** When I asked participants about their relationship with the fatherhood representative, responses included comments such as communicating as needed and serving as a life coach. John's comments regarding his relationship with the fatherhood representative reflected the theme of communicating as needed. John described the relationship as follows: "The representative was accommodating and understanding. She would stay on top of things, and whenever I needed to talk to her, she would always follow up with me on the same day." Brian's comments around the relationship with the fatherhood representative reflected that they communicated with him as needed. Brian responded as follows:

I've been in a couple of times, and they've been trying to help me. They communicate with you. He would call me, and he wanted me to call him whenever I have questions or need clarification on the process in the Fatherhood Program. It was a good relationship during the entire time that I was enrolled.



Some participants responded that the fatherhood representative was a life coach during their enrollment. Gerald's comments regarding the fatherhood representative serving as a life coach are reflected in his remarks as follows:

My representative asked if there is anything she could do to help me out. She told me that she did some research and found the information relating to obtaining a barbering license. She gave me the tools to rebuild my life.

Charles described his relationship with the fatherhood representative as one where he served as a life coach during his enrollment in the program. He responded as follows:

If I needed to reach out to her, I feel comfortable that if she doesn't have the answer, she'll give me some guidance, and she would sit me down with someone, so we can talk about things and work our way through whatever the situation is. It's been an enjoyable experience, very uplifting and motivating.

**Helpfulness of Fatherhood Representative.** When I asked participants about a time when they felt the fatherhood representative was helpful, the responses reflected themes of providing encouragement and support. Brian's reaction regarding the helpfulness of the fatherhood representative indicated that the representative encouraged his enrollment in the program. Brian commented as follows:

When they tried to tell me that I needed to change my attitude, I wasn't into it. I realized that I had to change my perspective on life and do something different. It

has been difficult for me on this journey with having to start over, but I now feel like I can be successful.

Charles' response also indicated that the fatherhood representative was helpful to him by encouraging enrollment. Charles described his experience as follows:

When we're entering the Fatherhood Program, it's seemingly one of the worst times of our lives because we know we must fulfill, and we haven't been able to do that. We have someone encouraging and positive and telling us, hey, give it another try.

The theme regarding receiving support emerged as a way that the fatherhood representative was helpful to the noncustodial fathers. Eric responded about the fatherhood representative providing support as follows:

He was more helpful in explaining the consequences. He stated that even though we've got you in this program, you still must try and make payments. There was an instance when I missed a court date. My fatherhood representative called me and asked if I knew about it. Once I informed him that I didn't, he gave me the contact information for the person that I would need to follow-up with to get it resolved.

**Lack of Help from Fatherhood Representative.** When I asked participants about a time when they felt that the fatherhood representative was not helpful, the primary themes were that they did not receive guidance during their enrollment, and the representative was always helpful. Sylvester responded that the fatherhood representative

was not helpful during his enrollment in the program since he did not receive guidance on what to do. Sylvester described his experience as follows:

The first time that I enrolled in the Fatherhood Program, there was no guidance. I didn't know that I would have to report to my representative that I was looking for jobs. No one told me what I needed to do in the beginning. I thought I just had to call them and let them know if I was working. When I asked them specific questions about the program, they gave me a business card and told me to call the phone number to get responses.

Charles responded regarding a time when he did not feel that the fatherhood representative was when guidance was not providing during enrollment. Charles provided the following comments:

My experience during the first enrollment was negative. Some interns were assisting the fatherhood representative during the session. When I spoke with them, it was apparent that they did not understand the requirements of the Fatherhood Program. They provided very generic responses to my questions. Paying child support is a serious matter, and I would rather speak with someone who knows the correct information to guide me in making the right decisions with my child support case.

Some participants indicated that they did not have time when the fatherhood representative was not helpful. For those participants, the theme of the representative

always being helpful surfaced as a response. Kent's reaction regarding the helpfulness of the fatherhood representative was evident based on the following comments:

There has never been a time when he wasn't helpful because if you showed up to class, he always had a job lead for you. He played trivia games with you sometimes to assist you in getting gas money and tokens for the bus. If you needed to talk to him about something, he was always willing to stay after class to give you dedicated time to talk to him.

**Recommended Changes to the Fatherhood Program.** When I asked participants about changes they would recommend to the Fatherhood Program, the primary themes were to provide detailed guidance on the program requirements and also to provide resources to assist with child visitation. Sylvester's response indicated that he recommended that the program be changed to include detailed guidance on the program requirements. He noted the following:

I could see a lot of changes in it based on the number of people that were enrolled more than once. They know what the program is about, but they don't know how to stay in it. When you're in the Fatherhood Program, they have resources, but no one truly has great guidance on what the requirements are. Each representative provides different instructions. I feel like the representatives should offer more assistance in helping us to get out of the situations that we are dealing with.

The additional theme of providing resources to assist with child visitation also emerged for some of the participants as a recommended change to the Fatherhood

Program. Charles' response regarding the recommendation to provide resources to assist with child visitation is reflected as follows:

I think the program should provide resources to assist with child visitation. Financial assistance isn't the only support that is needed to help the child be successful. There needs to be some interaction from the father. There are a lot of fathers in the program who have expressed concerns about not being able to see their children. If fathers can have visitation incorporated into the Fatherhood Program, this could help them greatly with improving their relationship with their children.

Kent explained why he recommends providing resources to assist with child visitation as a suggested change to the Fatherhood Program. He responded as follows:

There should be resources to help the fathers out with seeing their children. Sometimes, I might get to see my kids, and sometimes I may not. I feel like there's nothing I can do. I work two jobs to make sure that my children are taken care of, and I can't even see my kids. I want the Fatherhood Program to work with noncustodial fathers better to help them see their children. This process is a big issue for me.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of noncustodial fathers previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. I conducted semistructured interviews with ten noncustodial fathers who were enrolled in the program

within the past year. One research question was used to guide this study: What are the experiences of noncustodial fathers enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program?

Data related to experiences of noncustodial fathers were associated with the following focus areas: Role of fathers, the meaning of fatherhood, expectations of the Fatherhood Program, relationship with fatherhood representative, feelings regarding education and employment, and recommended changes to the Fatherhood Program. All participants responded to the interview questions based on their experiences while enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. In Chapter 5, the findings relate to the current body of literature and the relation to the conceptual framework. The limitations of the research are acknowledged. I offer suggestions for future research in addition to the implications for positive social change resulting from this study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions & Recommendations

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to determine the experiences and perceptions of noncustodial fathers previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding their ability to complete the program. Research has been conducted on Fatherhood Programs to determine their effectiveness and determine why the graduation rates were so low among participants (Georgia Department of Human Services, 2018). However, I did not locate any research that explored the experiences of noncustodial fathers participating in such programs. I also did not discover any research that examined the father's perceptions of how their experiences may have influenced their ability to complete the program successfully. Previous researchers found that of the 5,848 participants that enrolled in the Fatherhood Program as of 2017, only 35.6% completed the program (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2017). Procuring the insights of this population was vital because it provided a voice for fathers to give insight to Fatherhood Programs, child support agencies, and other social service organizations that provide services to noncustodial fathers.

For this study, I developed a generic qualitative study and incorporated Bandura's social learning theory as a data analysis process. Through qualitative, descriptive analysis, I used a deductive approach to analyze data from in-depth interviews with ten noncustodial fathers. I focused on the experiences of the noncustodial fathers who were previously enrolled in the Fatherhood Program. Themes emerged from each of the interviews surrounding the 17 interview questions. The results revealed four main

categories. I used the categories to organize the participants' responses from the interviews: (a) impact of the program on perceptions of fatherhood, (b) expectations and experiences with Fatherhood Program, c) impact of Fatherhood Program on participants, and d) experiences with fatherhood representative.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The results of the literature review in Chapter 2 revealed that in the process of addressing child support delinquency, it is critical for child support agencies to address the barriers that noncustodial fathers face in meeting their court-ordered obligations (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Fatherhood Programs were established in child support agencies to provide resources to help noncustodial fathers improve their financial circumstances by giving them the tools needed to become self-sufficient (Knox & Wang, 2016). The findings from my research study confirmed that individuals who were court-ordered to pay child support might face barriers with paying child support. The issue of paying child support was identified as a significant theme when noncustodial fathers were asked about their motivation to participate in the Fatherhood Program. According to the data, a significant expectation when enrolling in the program was to gain access to better job opportunities.

Fatherhood Programs were established to address the ongoing challenges faced by noncustodial fathers when they attempted to increase their financial opportunities and become more self-sufficient (Pruett, Pruett, Cowan & Cowan, 2017). Based on the findings in my research study, the noncustodial fathers' perception of the Fatherhood



Program helped them to be more responsible. The participants also indicated that the program impacted their feelings/actions regarding child support by perceiving the importance of doing what needs to be done.

### **Impact of The Program on Perceptions of Fatherhood**

The first category in the research study was the impact of the Fatherhood Program on the noncustodial fathers' perception of fatherhood. Previous research indicated that the perspectives of the noncustodial fathers were rarely examined since they were expected to pay their child support obligations regardless of their challenges (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). This research study showed that based on their enrollment in the program, the noncustodial fathers adopted behaviors that caused them to focus on their personal views of their role as a father. When considering the role of a responsible father, one theme that continued to emerge in previous research studies was the need for both financial and emotional support (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2018). In this research study, one of the subthemes that emerged from the responses provided by the participants was that they viewed their role as a father as being both a provider and being supportive. When considering the perception of child support, the first thought that comes to mind is money, but noncustodial fathers in the research study felt that child support was about more than the money. They also thought that it was vital for them to do what needs to be done to take care of the children.

Fatherhood Programs have been instrumental in promoting parental involvement for noncustodial parents in the lives of their children (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). The

noncustodial fathers viewed their role as being a provider and being supportive. Community-based programs have been instrumental in increasing the likelihood of fathers being more active in their children's lives (Schepard & Emery, 2015). Previous research also indicates that there is a correlation between consistent child support payments and father-child contact because fathers are motivated to pay when they are active in the lives of their children (Weiner, 2016). The participants viewed the responsibility of fatherhood as having a relationship with their children and being a better father.

### **Expectations and Experiences with Fatherhood Program**

Fatherhood Programs have been instrumental in encouraging parental involvement for noncustodial fathers in the lives of children (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Some of the participants expected to gain personal visitation time with their children. When I asked participants how they changed their behavior since being enrolled in the Fatherhood Program, some of them responded that they have now become more responsible and spend more time with their children. Participants acknowledged that the Fatherhood Program stressed continual involvement with their children and to make phone calls, text messages, or whatever additional modes of communication were available. They indicated that they initially enrolled in the Fatherhood Program based on experiencing issues paying their child support and were motivated to be responsible for making improvements in themselves while also strengthening their relationships with their children.

Based on previous research, there was an assumption by Congress that by establishing an order for the noncustodial father to pay child support, it would motivate them to pursue suitable employment to pay their obligations (Boggess, 2017). There were also previous studies that indicated that some noncustodial parents were either unemployed or underemployed (Solomon-Fears, 2016). According to the responses from participants in this research study, noncustodial fathers were motivated to participate in the Fatherhood Program since they had issues with paying child support and with preventing their driver's license from being suspended. Because the Fatherhood Program is assigned to the Georgia Division of Child Support Services, this expectation may have been based on their observation of other participants that may have been enrolled. It could be based on them receiving direct instructions from their case managers.

Previous research indicates that child support is not paid consistently and that most arrears are owed by 10% of noncustodial parents in the child support caseload (Keyes, 2018). All noncustodial fathers who participated in the study had past-due child support in their cases. Because the goal of the Fatherhood Program is to assist noncustodial fathers who are unemployed or underemployed, their expectation during enrollment was access to better jobs and personal visitation with their children. They also expected to get personal visitation with their children.

### **Impact of Fatherhood Program on Participants**

According to previous research, when considering the role of a responsible father, one theme that continued to emerge was the need for both financial and emotional

support (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2018). The findings in my research study align with previous research since participants indicated that their perceptions regarding child support were about more than the money. The noncustodial fathers also reported that the Fatherhood Program assisted them in realizing the importance of doing what needs to be done regarding child support.

The perspectives of noncustodial fathers regarding their financial struggle of supporting themselves were usually not taken into consideration when establishing child support obligations according to previous research (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). This finding was in alignment with my research study since the participants indicated that the Fatherhood Program impacted their feelings toward employment and education. They expressed a willingness to try different jobs and to go beyond a high school diploma. An additional benefit of the Fatherhood Programs was that they encourage low-income participants to become financially responsible (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). The findings from my research study were in alignment since the participants shared that the fatherhood impacted their behavior by causing them to be more responsible.

### **Experiences with Fatherhood Representative**

According to previous research, the policies that encourage parental involvement with children are in direct conflict with those governing incarceration for nonpayment of child support (Roman & Link, 2015). Based on my research study, this finding is in alignment with recommended changes to the Fatherhood Program. The participants recommended that fatherhood representatives provide more detailed guidance regarding

the program requirements. An additional recommendation was to receive resources to assist with child visitation.

There was an expectation in previous research that noncustodial parents' relationships would improve with their children as a result of participating in Fatherhood Programs (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2018). The findings from my research study were not in alignment with the views expressed in the previous research study. One of the recommended changes to the Fatherhood Program by the participants in my research study was to provide resources to assist in getting child visitation. Another concern was that some of the participants expressed concerns with the program being categorized as a Fatherhood Program rather than also having a motherhood or parenthood component (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2018). This finding was not identified in my research study by the fatherhood participants.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Through Bandura's social learning theory, I explained the behavior of the participants since it offered a lens through which we can understand the perceptions and experiences of noncustodial fathers participating in the Georgia Fatherhood Program who completed the program. According to Bandura (1977), people gain knowledge from each other through observation, modeling, and imitation. Through social learning theory, I examined the experiences of participants to gain an understanding of their perceptions based on social norms (Baker, Sanders, Turner and Morawska, 2017).

Social learning theorists believe that learning is a cognitive process that happens during observation or direct instruction (Kretchmar, 2015). In my research study, one of the categories that emerged was the impact on the perceptions of fatherhood. The findings suggested that noncustodial fathers felt that child support was about more than the money and that it was vital for them to do what needs to be done to take care of their children. This finding is in alignment with social learning theory since individuals can learn the expectations of fatherhood based on directly observing other fathers.

The noncustodial fathers' expectations of the Fatherhood Program were reflected in their perception of things that they liked and disliked about the program. The finding suggested that they were motivated to participate since they had issues with paying child support. This finding is also in alignment with social learning theory since noncustodial fathers can gain this perception based on observing other participants that may have gain support during their enrollment in the Fatherhood Program.

The category related to the impact of the Fatherhood Program on participants indicated that their feelings toward employment and their education changed. This finding is also in alignment with social learning theory since individuals learn behaviors from their social environment. Since noncustodial fathers are enrolled in the Fatherhood Program with other participants, they may adopt behavioral changes in alignment with social learning theory.

The category related to the experiences with fatherhood representatives is also in alignment with the social learning theory. Since all participants are assigned a fatherhood

representative, they have the opportunity to interact with them during their enrollment. All of the participants indicated that the fatherhood representative was necessary based on the support and encouragement received during enrollment.

### **Limitations**

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the experiences and perspectives of noncustodial fathers previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program that influenced their ability to complete the program. There were limitations in the research study that included the sample size, geographic location, availability of potential participants, and the possibility of skewed results. The first limitation was the sample size. The sample size was only a small percentage of the number of actual noncustodial fathers who enroll in the Fatherhood Program. As a result, this could limit the transferability of results about participants since it may not be a reliable representation of their perceptions.

An additional limitation was that the focus of the research was on the Georgia program, and, as such, the findings may not be transferable to Fatherhood Programs in other states throughout the country. Since participants are located throughout the state of Georgia, the opinions that were expressed by the participants may not include the perceptions that may have been presented by potential participants in other states.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Several research studies were conducted on Fatherhood Programs. The current study examined the experiences and perspectives of participants during their enrollment

in the Georgia Fatherhood Program regarding the ability to complete the program. Of the 5,848 enrollees that participated in the Georgia Fatherhood Program, only 35.6% completed all requirements. In contrast, an additional 62.3% were removed for not complying with all terms of the program (Georgia Division of Child Support Services, 2018). I would suggest that an additional qualitative research study be conducted to examine the experiences and perspectives of participants after graduating from the program. The goal would be to determine how successful the participants were in meeting their child support obligations based on the tools gained during their enrollment in the program. This research may provide additional insight to determine if the program is providing the tools needed to assist participants in becoming self-sufficient. The research study could provide more insight on required enhancements to the program guidelines to increase the number of enrollees that graduate. Child support professionals could use the findings from the research as guidance in interacting with noncustodial fathers. The results may provide additional insight into the need for noncustodial fathers to receive referrals to the Fatherhood Program at the beginning of the case rather than when they are delinquent in their child support obligation.

Another recommendation is to conduct a similar qualitative study with a broader participant pool. Several noncustodial fathers were interested in participating in the research study but were unable to contribute based on non-traditional work schedules. The next study should allow more flexibility in scheduling dates, times, locations to capture additional perspectives.



Since full disclosure was provided to participants in the Informed Consent, participants may have skewed responses since the interview was conducted by a researcher that was also employed by the department. Depending on their experiences with the agency and whether appropriate follow-up happened in their cases, their responses may or may not have been truthful. I would recommend that a similar qualitative study be conducted where the interviewer's identity as a child support employee was not disclosed. This research study may provide a different set of responses from participants. Depending on their experiences with the agency and whether appropriate follow-up happened in their cases, their responses may or may not have been truthful.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The results of this research study provided more insight into how the experiences and perspectives of noncustodial fathers enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program influenced their ability to complete the program. Noncustodial fathers must know about all of the resources that may be available to them when they receive a court order to pay child support. Findings from this research study could provide more insight into child support agencies in Georgia and on a national level regarding the impact of input from noncustodial parents when it comes to their ability to pay their child support. Since participants in the research study indicated that the most helpful information gained from the Fatherhood Program was job opportunities and educational resources, this information could be communicated by the child support community. Child support

agencies could engage in marketing opportunities to promote Fatherhood Programs and other resources that may be available to both the noncustodial and custodial parents.

My plan for dissemination is to present the research study to government agencies, human service professionals, and local non-profit organizations in hopes of providing more insight on the challenges that noncustodial parents face when they are ordered to pay child support. Findings from the research study indicate that the perceptions of noncustodial parents enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program should be considered when interacting with future participants. I think that it is essential to share the findings from the study with child support to educate them on some of the challenges that noncustodial parents face regarding child support cases and their pursuit of relief from Fatherhood Programs. The suggestion for positive social change includes recommendations to share perceptions of noncustodial fathers who have had positive experiences in becoming self-sufficient since enrolling in the program. By sharing the opinions of participants that completed the program, this may increase the percentage of noncustodial fathers who graduate from the program.

### **Summary**

Fatherhood Programs have previously been the focus of many research studies to identify opportunities to increase enrollment. Previous research has not focused on the experiences and perspectives of participants that enroll in the programs. This research study focused on the insight of noncustodial African American fathers enrolled in the

Georgia Fatherhood Program, to gain an understanding of their experiences during enrollment while also filling a gap that was missing from previous research studies.

This study was effective in providing the experience of the Georgia Fatherhood Program from the participant's perspective. This study also gave the noncustodial fathers a voice in providing insight into how the experience during enrollment felt. The most significant insight from the study responded in support of the critical role that the representative plays in ensuring that noncustodial fathers are engaged throughout the process to assist them in completing the program.

This research study increased the knowledge regarding the Georgia Fatherhood Program based on the experiences of noncustodial fathers that influenced their ability to complete the program. The study also revealed that more research is needed to understand how to continue to motivate fathers by engaging them in the fatherhood process based on their experiences.

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## Appendix A: Letter of Permission to Conduct Research

March 15, 2018

Division of Child Support Services  
Georgia Department of Human Services  
Attn: Director Tangler Gray  
Two Peachtree St., NW, 20<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Atlanta, Ga. 30303

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Director Gray:

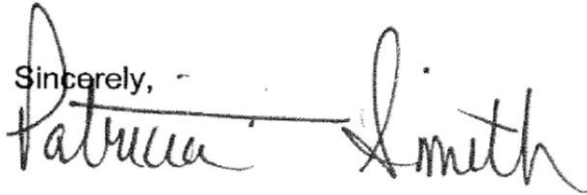
I am completing a doctoral dissertation at Walden University entitled "A Qualitative Study: Non-Custodial Parents Enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program". I would like your permission to reprint in my dissertation excerpts from the following:

- Georgia Department of Human Services (2016). Data Warehouse. Retrieved on 03/21/2016 from <https://dhsedw.dhs.ga.gov/analytics/saw.dll?Dashboard>.
- Georgia Division of Child Support Services (2016). Retrieved on 03/21/2016 from <http://ocss.dhs.georgia.gov/fact-sheets>.
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The excerpts to be reproduced are child support demographics related to participants previously enrolled in the Georgia Fatherhood Program. The data will not include personal identifying information i.e. name, address, social security number and individual registration numbers. The requested permission extends to any future revisions and editions of my dissertation, including non-exclusive world rights in all languages, to the electronic publication of my dissertation by Walden University and to the prospective publication of my dissertation by ProQuest.

ProQuest may supply copies of my dissertation on demand. These rights will in no way restrict republication of the material in any other form by you or by others authorized by you. If these arrangements meet with your approval, please sign this letter at your earliest convenience and I can pick it up. Thank you very much.

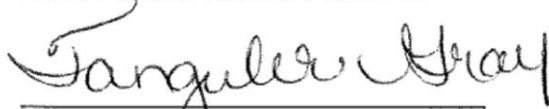
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Patricia Smith". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Patricia Smith  
Walden University  
Human Services Administration - PhD Doctoral Student

CC: Dr. Tracey Phillips, Walden University Committee Chair

PERMISSION GRANTED FOR THE  
USE REQUESTED ABOVE:

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tangler Gray". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Tangler Gray  
Director  
Division of Child Support Services  
Georgia Department of Human Services  
Two Peachtree St., NW, 20<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Atlanta, Ga. 30303

Date: 3/16/18



Appendix B: Demographics Questionnaire

**Section A:**

**Date and Time:**

**Interviewee Identifier #**

**Interviewer Initials:**

**Location of Interview:**

**Section B:**

**Age:**

**Ethnicity:**

**Nationality:**

**Section C:**

**How many children do you have?**

**What is your highest level of education?**

**Are you employed?**

**Do you currently have an open order for child support?**

**Are you currently in arrears in your child support payments?**

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. How do you view your role as a father?
2. What does fatherhood mean to you?
3. Can you describe how you first became aware of the Fatherhood Program?
4. What were your expectations when you joined the Fatherhood Program?
5. Please tell me what you like the most about the Fatherhood Program.
6. Please tell me what you like the least about the Fatherhood Program.
7. What was the most helpful information that you gained from your involvement in the Fatherhood Program?
8. How have you changed your behavior as a father since being enrolled in the Fatherhood Program?
9. How have your feelings regarding child support changed as a result of participating in the Fatherhood Program?
10. How have your actions regarding child support changed as a result of participating in the Fatherhood Program?
11. How have your feelings regarding employment changed as a result of participating in the Fatherhood Program?
12. How have your feelings regarding your education changed as a result of participating in the Fatherhood Program?
13. Tell me about your relationship with your fatherhood representative.

14. Tell me about a time when you felt your fatherhood representative was helpful.
15. Tell me about a time when you felt your fatherhood representative was not helpful.
16. What do you feel helped you the most to complete the program?
17. What would you change about the Fatherhood Program?