

**STEPPING UP OR STEPPING BACK: HIGHLY DISADVANTAGED PARENTS'  
RESPONSES TO THE BUILDING STRONG FAMILIES PROGRAM\***

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**STEPPING UP OR STEPPING BACK: HIGHLY DISADVANTAGED PARENTS' RESPONSES TO THE  
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Andrew Clarkwest, Alexandra Killewald, and Robert G. Wood<sup>†</sup>

The proportion of children raised by a single parent has increased dramatically in recent decades, particularly among low income families (Ellwood and Jencks 2004). The high rates of single parenthood among low income families has caused concern because of findings that children growing up in single-parent families are, on average, at greater risk of poor behavioral, health, and academic outcomes, unstable family structure, and poverty than are children raised by their married biological parents (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Amato 2001). The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study<sup>1</sup> has provided important new information on unwed couples with children, revealing that the large majority of unwed parents are romantically involved at the time of their child's birth and have high hopes for a stable, enduring marriage (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004). Those couples nonetheless face many barriers to achieving these hopes and break up at high rates (Carlson et al. 2005).

Those findings were the impetus for the Building Strong Families (BSF) project, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF). The BSF project is an ambitious intervention offering group-based relationship skills education with trained facilitators to unwed couples who are expecting a child or who have just had a baby. The program's ultimate aim is to promote the well-being of children by

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<sup>1</sup> Fragile Families is the first large nationwide study focusing on children born to unmarried parents. More information on the study, which is conducted jointly by Princeton University and Columbia University, can be found at <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>.

improving the quality of unmarried parents' relationships and increasing the likelihood that they remain together. The BSF project was designed to reach new or expecting parents at the "magic moment" around the time of the birth of a child (McLanahan et al. 2003), when unmarried parents are particularly hopeful about the future of their couple relationship and are thought to be most willing to participate in an unfamiliar and relatively time-intensive program aimed at strengthening that relationship.

Mathematica Policy Research<sup>2</sup> is conducting an experimental evaluation of the BSF program for ACF in eight evaluation sites. In general, at the time of the 15-month follow-up the BSF intervention did not have a statistically or substantively significant effect on couples' relationship status or quality, or fathers' involvement with their children. Although the BSF had little or no effect on couples' relationships overall, impacts varied meaningfully across the eight evaluation sites; for example, the Oklahoma City site's BSF program had a consistent pattern of positive effects at 15 months. Perhaps most surprisingly, however, at the Baltimore site the BSF intervention had numerous negative effects: at the time of the 15-month follow-up survey, Baltimore couples who had been randomly assigned to participate in the BSF program were much *less* likely than control group couples to be romantically involved; fathers assigned to the BSF program were *less* likely to provide substantial financial support for their children or see them regularly; and mothers in the BSF sample were *more* likely to report experiencing a severe physical assault than were mothers in the control group.

The pattern of adverse effects in Baltimore raises important questions about the factors that shape low-income parents' relationships. What was distinctive about the Baltimore program or

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<sup>2</sup> Mathematica is an employee-owned research organization that provides objective analysis across several areas of social policy including health, education, family support, employment, disability, and international development. See <http://mathematica-mpr.com> for additional information.

its participants that may have led to this unexpected and unintuitive pattern of results? More generally, what do the Baltimore results tell us about how cultural contexts, in conjunction with structural conditions, influence efficacy of social policies designed to improve people's well-being? The anomalous results of this type of negative case (Emigh 1997) provide the opportunity for analyses that expand theory about the forces driving family formation among disadvantaged populations and also refine knowledge to improve programs that serve such families.

This chapter is divided into three main parts. First, we describe in more detail the development of the BSF program, its operation, and the main findings of the study.<sup>3</sup> Second, we describe the differences between Baltimore and the other sites. Similar to many other sites, the Baltimore site recruited a sample of predominantly African American couples. However, the couples in Baltimore were distinctly more disadvantaged than the couples recruited by other sites, including those sites serving primarily African American couples. Finally, we outline and evaluate several explanations for how highly disadvantaged unmarried couples' preexisting culturally-influenced attributes—including relationship expectations, the meanings they ascribe to being a partner and parent, and levels of trust—together with limited economic prospects could lead a program like the BSF to inadvertently increase relationship instability. We conclude with a discussion on how the implications of this study for an understanding of how cultural and structural factors may affect the efficacy of policies designed to improve people's well-being.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the BSF intervention and its evaluation see Wood et al. (2010a) and Wood et al. (2010b).

## **Part I: The BSF Program and Findings from the Impact Analyses**

### *The BSF Program*

Eight organizations in diverse locations across the United States were selected to implement BSF programs. The objective of the evaluation was to determine whether a well-implemented relationship skills education program could help couples meet their goals for lasting relationships and, in turn, improve the well-being of those couples' children. Project and ACF staff selected the organizations and provided both implementation assistance and monitoring. In most sites (including Baltimore), local organizations built BSF from the infrastructure of existing programs, though the existing organizational structures and services varied across sites.

Couples' participation in the study was strictly voluntary. BSF Sites most commonly recruited couples into the study through places that serve expectant or new mothers, such as prenatal clinics, childbirth education classes, hospital maternity wards, and WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) clinics. The sites either used their own staff to approach potential participants directly in those locations or created agreements with the organizations running them to refer potentially eligible participants to BSF (Dion, Avellar, and Clary 2010). Although mothers were often approached first, the consent of both partners was required for BSF eligibility and most programs strove to meet with the mother and father together to describe the program prior to obtaining consent. Site staff described the program to potential participants as a way to simultaneously improve their relationship as well as do what is best for their child (Dion, et al. 2008).

In general, couples were eligible for BSF if they met all of the following five criteria: first, both partners desired to participate; second, the couple was romantically involved; third, the couple was expecting a baby together or had a baby within the last three months; fourth, the parents were not married at the time of conception; finally, both parents were at least 18 years of

age. Potential participating couples were also screened for intimate partner violence prior to determining eligibility. If there was evidence of violence that could be aggravated by BSF participation, the couple was deemed ineligible for BSF and referred to other services.

Although the program did not set any upper age or income restrictions on participation, participants were overwhelmingly young and generally low income. About 42 percent of couples had at least one partner under age 21, and 93 percent had at least one partner age 29 or younger. Couples' average annual earnings were \$20,475, well below the median household income in the United States. The program served an ethnoracially diverse sample. About 52 percent of the couples had two African American partners, 20 percent had two Hispanic partners, 12 percent had two white partners, and the other 16 percent were composed of some other combination of partners.

Each BSF program had some flexibility in its structure and curriculum, but all programs shared three components: group sessions on relationship skills, individual support from family coordinators, and assessment and referral to support services. The group sessions on relationship skills typically met weekly, ranging from two to five hours at each meeting, comprising a total of 30 to 42 hours. Family coordinators were available to assess couples' needs, reinforce relationship skills, provide emotional support, and encourage participation in and completion of the group sessions. Coordinators also provided referrals to auxiliary support services, such as education, employment, and mental health services.

Each site selected one of three research-based curricula adapted specifically for the BSF target population: Loving Couples, Loving Children (LCLC), developed by Drs. John and Julie Gottman; Love's Cradle (LC), developed by Mary Ortwein and Dr. Bernard Guerney; or the Becoming Parents Program for Low-Income, Low Literacy Couples (BPP), developed by Dr. Pamela Jordan. These types of curricula had shown positive impacts on couples' relationships in

samples of mostly married, middle income, typically white couples (Hawkins et al. 2008). Five of the eight evaluation sites (including Baltimore) chose the LCLC curriculum; two chose the LC curriculum; and one (Oklahoma) chose the BPP curriculum.

The adaptations to the BSF curricula were aimed to better address issues specific to low-income unmarried couples, enhance the cultural sensitivity of the materials, and accommodate a wider range of reading levels. For example, early focus groups revealed that many potential participants had negative interactions with educational institutions and wished to avoid being lectured about the “right” way to do things. In response to this information, the BSF curriculum was modified to allow couples to share their own experiences and learn from each other, rather than emphasizing a didactic approach. In addition, topics were added to the curriculum that research suggests are particularly important for the target population, including skills for building trust and commitment, managing relationships with children from prior relationships and their parents, and understanding the rewards and challenges of marriage (McConnell et al. 2006).

#### *Findings of the BSF Impact Analyses at 15 Months*

The eight evaluation sites ultimately enrolled 5,102 couples in the study (See Table 1). After agreeing to participate in the study, couples were randomly assigned, with half selected to be offered the chance to participate in the BSF program. The other half was placed in a control group that was offered no services.

Location	Sponsor Organization	Number of Study Couples
Atlanta, Georgia	Georgia State University, Latin American Association	930
Baltimore, Maryland	Center for Urban Families	602
Baton Rouge, Louisiana	Family Road of Greater Baton Rouge	652
Florida: Orange and Broward counties	Healthy Families Florida	695
Houston, Texas	Healthy Family Initiatives	405
Indiana: Allen, Marion, and Lake counties	Healthy Families Indiana	466
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma	Public Strategies, Inc.	1,010
San Angelo, Texas	Healthy Families San Angelo	342
<b>All Programs</b>		<b>5,102</b>

The BSF program was expected to increase couples’ exposure to relationship skills services. All couples in the BSF group were offered BSF services and actively encouraged to attend the classes, although they were not required to participate. Couples in the control group could seek relationship skills education from sources other than BSF. Among BSF couples, 61 percent reported attending a group session on relationship skills during the 15-months between random assignment and the follow-up survey. Among control group couples, only 17 percent reported attending a relationship skills group session. When asked about the number of hours they attended the groups, BSF couples reported attending 14 hours, on average, compared with an average of two hours of group relationship skills education for control group couples.

The BSF 15-month impact analysis (Wood et al. 2012) focused on outcomes in the following domains: relationship status, relationship quality, intimate partner violence, co-

parenting and father involvement.<sup>4</sup> Across the eight programs as a whole, the program was not found to influence outcomes in any key domain. For example, 15 months after random assignment, 76 percent of BSF couples were still romantically involved, compared with 77 percent of control group couples. Similarly, BSF and control group couples were equally likely to be married to each other at that time (17 and 18 percent respectively) and to be living together, whether married or unmarried (62 percent for both groups). They were also equally happy in their romantic relationships, with average ratings of 8.4 and 8.3 respectively on a relationship happiness scale ranging from 0 to 10.

Despite the overall lack of effects, the evaluation revealed some instances of program success, including a consistent pattern of positive impacts at the Oklahoma City site. However, this program differed from those at other sites in several ways, such as using a curriculum not used by any other site, larger class sizes that included married couples who were not part of the study together with unmarried BSF couples, longer sessions that allowed couples to complete the curricula in fewer weeks, and greater use of financial incentives for participation (Dion et al. 2006; Dion, Avellar, and Clary 2010).

However, the evaluation also uncovered a number of negative program impacts in the Baltimore site (Table 2). Notably, at the time of the 15-month follow-up survey, only 59 percent of BSF couples in Baltimore were still romantically involved, compared with 70 percent of control group couples. Similarly, the percent of mothers reporting that the father provided financial support was 9 points lower in the BSF group (61 percent) than in the control group (70

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<sup>4</sup> The primary outcomes examined in the study, by domain, were: *Relationship status*: couple is still romantically involved, couple lives together (married or unmarried), couple is married; *Relationship quality*: relationship happiness, support and affection, use of constructive conflict behaviors, avoidance of destructive conflict behaviors, and sexual fidelity; *Intimate partner violence*: mother reports no severe physical assaults, father reports no severe physical assaults; *Co-parenting*: quality of co-parenting relationship; *Father involvement*: father lives with child, father spends substantial time with child daily, and father provides substantial financial support. See Wood et al. (2010) for details on measures.

**Table 2 15–Month Follow–Up Impact Estimates: Baltimore**

Outcome	BSF Group	Control Group	Estimated Impact	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
<b>Relationship Status</b>					
Still romantically involved (%)	59.4	70.3	-10.9***	-19.3	-2.5
Living together, married or unmarried (%)	41.6	45.7	-4.0	-12.7	4.6
Married (%)	7.5	6.8	0.7	-3.8	4.5
<b>Relationship Quality</b>					
Support and affection <sup>a</sup>	3.01	3.12	-0.11**	-0.22	-0.01
Use of constructive conflict behaviors <sup>b</sup>	3.14	3.18	-0.04	-0.15	0.06
Avoidance of destructive conflict behaviors <sup>c</sup>	2.62	2.62	0.01	-0.11	0.12
Neither reports infidelity (%)	58.3	58.6	-0.3	-8.8	8.2
Mother reports no severe assaults (%) <sup>d</sup>	85.3	90.7	-5.3*	-11.1	0.4
Father reports no severe assaults (%) <sup>d</sup>	79.0	79.4	-0.4	-8.4	7.6
<b>Parenting and Father Involvement</b>					
Quality of coparenting relationship <sup>e</sup>	4.23	4.32	-0.09*	-0.21	0.0211
Father parenting and involvement					
Lives with child (%) <sup>f</sup>	43.8	51.2	-7.4*	-16.3	1.5
Spends substantial time with child daily (%) <sup>g</sup>	53.1	60.5	-7.3*	-16.2	1.5
Provides substantial financial support (%) <sup>h</sup>	61.2	70.5	-9.3**	-17.9	-0.6
Level of cognitive and social play	4.40	4.64	-0.24*	-0.49	0.01
Absence of parenting stress <sup>i</sup>	3.38	3.37	0.02	-0.10	0.13
Avoidance of frequent spanking (%) <sup>j</sup>	90.5	85.5	4.9	-2.0	11.9
Mother parenting					
Level of cognitive and social play	5.19	5.15	0.05	-0.09	0.19
Avoidance of parenting stress <sup>j</sup>	3.42	3.41	0.01	-0.09	0.11
Absence of frequent spanking (%) <sup>j</sup>	85.3	87.0	-1.7	-8.2	4.8
<b>Sample Size</b>					
<b>All couples</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>262</b>			
<b>Mothers</b>	<b>258</b>	<b>252</b>			
<b>Fathers</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>218</b>			

Source: BSF 15-month follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.

Notes: Impacts are adjusted using a regression controlling for the couple's baseline relationship and demographic characteristics. See (Wood et al. 2010b) for more information.

<sup>a</sup>“Support and affection” is based on 6 survey items and is measured on a 1-to-4 strongly-disagree-to-strongly-agree scale and is defined for all couples, irrespective of the status of the relationship at 15 months.

<sup>b</sup>The use of constructive conflict behavior scale is measured on a 1-to-4 strongly-disagree-to-strongly-agree scale. This measure is defined for all intact couples, as well as those who are no longer in a romantic relationship but are still in regular contact with each other (talking to each other at least a few times a month).

<sup>c</sup>The avoidance of destructive conflict behavior scale is measured on a 1-to-4 strongly-agree-to-strongly-disagree scale. This measure is defined for all intact couples, as well as those who are no longer in a romantic relationship but are still in regular contact with each other (talking to each other at least a few times a month). This scale is coded such that positive impacts correspond to the BSF group having less destructive conflict behavior.

<sup>d</sup>Physical assault is measured by the 12 items on the physical assault subscale of the revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2). The measure includes violence from any romantic partner during the past year and is based on the respondent's report of partner's behavior. The severity of violence is based on classifications developed by the creators of the CTS2 (Straus et al. 1996). The developers designated five items as “minor” acts and seven as “severe.”

<sup>e</sup>The coparenting scale is measured on a 1-to-5 strongly-disagree-to-strongly-agree scale and is based on 10 items drawn from the Parenting Alliance Inventory.

<sup>f</sup>Fathers are defined as living with the child if both the mother and father report that the father lived with the child at the time of the survey.

<sup>g</sup>Fathers are defined as having spent substantial time with the child if both the mother and father report that during the past month the father spent one hour or more with the child on a daily basis.

<sup>h</sup>Fathers are recorded as having provided substantial financial support if the mother reports that the father covered at least half of the costs of raising the BSF child.

<sup>i</sup>The parenting stress scale is measured on a 1-to-4 none-of-the-time-to-all-of-the-time scale and is based on own reports to four items from the Aggravation in Parenting Scale.

<sup>j</sup>Frequent spanking is defined as spanking a few times a week or more and is based on self reports.

\*/\*\*/\*\* Statistically significant at the .10/.05/.01 level, two-tailed test.

percent). In addition, women in the BSF program in Baltimore were more likely than women in the control group to report having been severely physically assaulted by a romantic partner in the past year,<sup>5</sup> 15 percent compared with 9 percent. The remainder of this chapter focuses on explanations for the seemingly counterintuitive results at the Baltimore site.

## **Part II: Differences between Baltimore and Other BSF Sites**

Unlike in Oklahoma City, these differences cannot be readily explained by differences in delivery of the intervention. The Baltimore program, sponsored by the Center for Urban Families, used a curriculum (LCLC) shared by four other sites and provided it in a fashion similar to those sites. The Center for Urban Families had extensive experience providing employment and fatherhood services to low-income men and had also conducted a parenting program for unmarried couples.

As an organization, the Center for Urban Families differs from other sites in that it is a community-based nonprofit focused on improving the lives of fathers,<sup>6</sup> particularly those living in high risk areas. The Center is located in a in a high-poverty, predominantly African American neighborhood in West Baltimore. The organization's structure did not appear to greatly affect delivery of BSF services, but it did influence the couples recruited. Although coordinators in Baltimore used some recruiting approaches common to other BSF sites, such as finding couples in prenatal clinics, they emphasized recruiting methods that would allow the program to reach very disadvantaged couples, including those not likely connected to any supportive services. The

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<sup>5</sup> This could include violence experienced in subsequent relationships after dissolution of the relationship with the BSF partner.

<sup>6</sup> At the time BSF began, the organization was called the Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development (CFWD).

Center for Urban Families had a history of proactively identifying and recruiting participants for its fatherhood programs using street outreach, approaching men in locations where people gather in the community, such as basketball courts, laundromats, and parks, and speaking to them about its programs and services. The program adapted this technique into its BSF recruitment by focusing on couples as part of its ongoing commitment to connecting with and serving the population in Baltimore City (Dion et al. 2006; Dion, Avellar, and Clary 2010).

Findings from our implementation analysis suggest (Dion, Avellar, and Clary 2010) that this distinctive recruiting practice allowed the Baltimore site to reach a subset of unmarried couples—and fathers, in particular—that other sites, lacking the same on-the-street neighborhood presence and experience working with fathers in high poverty areas, were unable to reach. Descriptive information on the couples recruited to the Baltimore site (see Table 3) confirms the site’s study sample is distinct from other sites’ samples in several aspects.

One striking characteristic of the Baltimore sample is that it contains the highest proportion of African American couples. Could the negative impacts observed in the Baltimore site be a sign that the BSF programs were ineffective for African American couples in general? Subgroup analysis does not support this interpretation. In the cross-site results, African Americans are the one ethnoracial group in which some positive program impacts are observed (Wood et al. 2010a). This suggests that the program did not generally fail in making itself culturally relevant to African Americans and that ethnoracial composition alone cannot account for the Baltimore results.

But the Baltimore couples in the study differ from those in other sites in ways that we hypothesize may have influenced BSF’s surprising negative effect: more tenuous romantic relationships, greater social isolation, and more severe economic disadvantage among fathers.

**Table 3. Characteristics of Couples Enrolled in Baltimore Compared to Couples Enrolled in Other BSF Sites**

Characteristics	Baltimore (Mean)	Other Sites (Mean)	Baltimore Rank (out of 8 sites)	Most Similar Site (if Baltimore is at extreme)	Mean of Most Similar Site
<b>Pre-Intervention</b>					
Lives with partner full-time (%) (range: 1 to 4)	47	66	8	Baton Rouge	53
Both partners expect to marry (%) (range: 1 to 4)	38	63	8	Atlanta	49
Multiple partner fertility, any (%)	57	46	1	Atlanta	53
Couple earnings	21,762	20,306	2	--	--
Receives TANF or Food Stamps (%)	58	44	2	--	--
Mother employed (%)	35	32	4	--	--
Father employed (%)	58	76	8	Atlanta	65
Both partners are African American (%)	92	47	1	Atlanta	80
Both partners attend religious services regularly (%)	8	26	8	Florida	19
<b>15-Month Follow-up (Control Group Only)</b>					
Romantically involved (%)	69	77	8	Florida	75
Couple lives together full-time (%)	45	61	8	Atlanta	53
Father spends time with child daily (%)	59	68	8	Baton Rouge	63
Mother reports that father provides substantial financial support (%)	70	75	8	Oklahoma City	72
<b>Sample Size</b>					
Pre-intervention	<b>602</b>	<b>4,500</b>			
15-Month Follow-up (Control Group Only)	<b>262</b>	<b>1,945</b>			

Source: BSF baseline information form, administered by sites, and 15-month follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.

Note: At 15-months, observations are weighted for survey non-response. See the technical supplement to the BSF 15-month impact report (Wood et al. 2010b) for details on data collection and measures.

Baltimore couples' more tenuous relationships are reflected in lower pre-intervention rates of cohabitation, lower expectations of marriage, and higher rates of prior multiple partner fertility. Thus, these couples appear to be embedded in relationships with lower average levels of commitment and higher hurdles to achieving stable, high-quality relationships. Baltimore couples' less frequent attendance at religious services may simply reflect lower levels of religiosity. However, religious attendance is also an indicator of social integration and support (Ellison and George 1994; Bradley 1995), so the less frequent religious attendance for the

Baltimore couples may indicate that they are less embedded in social support networks and more isolated from mainstream service organizations. Lastly, fathers in the Baltimore site were less likely to be employed than in any other site. This may indicate that fathers in the Baltimore site face greater structural barriers to employment, either because the organization succeeded in recruiting a more disadvantaged set of fathers, or because of distinctive features of the Baltimore labor market.

Not only is the Baltimore sample at the extreme of the eight sites on all of these measures, on most they are quite a distance from the next closest site. For instance, with respect to marriage expectations, in only 38 percent of Baltimore couples did both partners expect to marry at the time of enrollment, compared to 63 percent across the other seven sites and 49 percent in the next closest site. Only 58 percent of Baltimore fathers were employed at baseline, compared to 76 percent in the remaining sites combined and 65 percent in the next lowest site. And in only 8 percent of Baltimore couples did both partners attend religious services regularly, less than one third the 26 percent rate overall and less than half the 19 percent rate of the next lowest site.

Apart from these individual-level characteristics, Baltimore couples also were more likely to live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. Unlike many other BSF sites, which were located in office parks in largely commercial areas, the Center for Urban Families is located in a high poverty Baltimore neighborhood. Mathematica's final implementation analysis (Dion, Avellar, and Clary 2010) noted that the organization focused on serving "low-income families, particularly those in high-risk areas" (p. xv), with the organization's street canvassing occurring in "impoverished West Baltimore" (p. 67). Other sites undoubtedly served couples living in concentrated disadvantage, but Baltimore was unique in its intentional effort to bring couples from such circumstances into the BSF program.

The Baltimore sample is not an outlier in all areas. For instance, the baseline employment rate for mothers was near the average for the eight BSF sites. This is consistent with the hypothesis that it is the *fathers* reached through the Center for Urban Families’ recruitment that are distinctive in their economic disadvantage. The average earnings of Baltimore couples are actually higher than the average in other sites, though this is driven entirely by higher earnings by the mothers. Fathers’ earnings are lower in Baltimore than elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, the measured characteristics suggest that the unique position of and recruiting by the Center for Urban Families led to a sample of couples whose relationships were less established and whose partners—especially the men—were less connected to major economic and social institutions. These are couples whom we would expect to experience greater relationship instability. The follow-up relationship outcomes for the control group (who were not affected by the intervention) confirm that expectation. As shown in Table 3, 15 months after random assignment control group couples in Baltimore were much less likely to be living together or romantically involved than control group couples in any other site. And, as might be expected given the higher rates of relationship dissolution, the fathers were much less likely to spend time daily with their children or provide substantial financial support.

### **Part III: Explaining the Anomalous Findings in Baltimore**

#### *Potential Explanations for Negative Program Impacts in Baltimore*

Our knowledge of the differences between Baltimore and other BSF sites suggests that the negative impacts in Baltimore are due to differences in the population that the Center for Urban

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<sup>7</sup> Mean earnings provide a misleading comparison of economic well-being across sites given the higher cost of living in Baltimore, the only East Coast site in the study. Other BSF locations such as Indiana, Oklahoma, and Texas, tend to have much lower costs of living. And despite the relatively high wages, Baltimore couples’ rate of TANF and Food Stamps usage was 58 percent, 14 percentage points higher than the mean in other sites.

Families was able to reach and recruit, rather than by differences in delivery of the services. But even if the couples served in Baltimore differed fundamentally from those in other sites, why would the program cause that particular subset of couples to experience more relationship instability than they would have otherwise? The evaluation showed that the program did not reduce couples' employment or earnings, and we have no reason to think that participation in BSF worsened couples' relationship skills. So, in Baltimore, assignment to the treatment group seemingly caused relationships to be more prone to dissolution without worsening couples' circumstances. This implies that the program must have changed BSF couples' perceptions of their relationships, their partners, or themselves in ways that induced break-ups. In this section we outline some hypotheses for how BSF might have such an impact, and why it would be more likely to occur among the most economically disadvantaged and socially isolated couples.<sup>8</sup>

We start from the premise that as family formation has become deinstitutionalized (Cherlin 2004), there is an increasing variety of expectations for what defines romantic and familial relationships, and individuals' roles within them. Deinstitutionalization leads to ambiguity in the roles that family members hold, especially for unmarried cohabiting couples (Cherlin 2004; Nock 1995), nonresidential fathers (Hamer 2001; Jarrett et al. 2002), and couples with children from prior relationships (Cherlin 1978; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1994).

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<sup>8</sup> One potential argument against the assertion that the negative Baltimore results were driven by the particular level of economic disadvantage, social isolation, and underlying propensity for relationship instability is that the cross-site analysis did not tend to find negative impacts for couples with those types of characteristics. One exception is that the program's impact on couples with multiple partner fertility was negative relative to the impact on couples in which neither partner had a child from a prior relationship. We observed a negative impact among couples in which at least one partner had a child from another relationship, but no such impact among couples with multiple partner fertility. And, as noted earlier, the uniqueness of the Baltimore couples may not be fully captured by measured traits. The Center's unique location, mission, and street-level recruiting approach targeting men and focusing on disadvantaged neighborhoods seem likely to have attracted a set of participants—and fathers in particular—that differ qualitatively from participants in other sites.

In this ambiguous context, individuals have considerable choice in constructing their own definitions of appropriate and healthy relationships. For couples in BSF, we anticipate that their generally disadvantaged material circumstances will shape these interpretations. Poverty affects both the cultural repertoires that individuals have available to them (Swidler 1986), and how they use them to understand their relationships (Fosse 2010). Because poverty limits the material resources that individuals possess, they will tend to adopt expectations for their own roles that fit within their resource limitations. For instance, fathers in poverty often dismiss the provider role as the defining feature of a good father, instead emphasizing the importance of providing an emotional connection with children (Jarrett et al. 2002; Hamer 2001; Waller 2010).

Relationship expectations may also be adapted to fit both individual resources and social norms. The pervasive distrust between partners highlighted in studies of low-income couple relationships (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Waller and McLanahan 2005) can affect individuals' views of the responsibilities that come with their familial roles. For instance, in his interviews with low-income men in Boston, the sociologist Nathan Fosse (2010) finds distrust of women among highly disadvantaged men can become a justification to frame their own role as an intimate partner as one that does not require fidelity.

Although the BSF curricula are focused on developing relationship skills rather than prescribing roles, they nonetheless assume certain types of responsibility and norms of behavior, including sexual fidelity and provision of financial support. Interviews with couples who participated in the BSF curricula revealed that a primary conclusion that couples took from the sessions was the importance of fathers "stepping up" to assume more financial responsibility, provide a better role model for their children, and be more reliable. As one father stated, "I realized that this baby's not gonna raise itself. The baby can't obviously get a job. And I knew, once thinking about it, that she's [his partner] gonna take some time to heal [after surgery] and I

had to step up” (Dion, Avellar, and Clary 2010: xxi). As such, the curricula may present models of partnership and fatherhood that challenge the views held consciously or unconsciously by participants.

From a programmatic perspective, this attempt to challenge and change participants’ views may be one of the goals. But as the sociologist Maureen Waller (2010: 120) notes, this sort of challenge could have negative repercussions such that “disadvantaged parents who embrace ‘mainstream’ ideas about enduring unions may dissolve their relationships.” This would occur if the cultural model presented is one that individuals are not (or perceive they are not) able to live up to. The more disadvantaged the population, the more likely the models presented by BSF are to conflict with the ideas that individuals have adopted of what family roles require. As such, the program may challenge individuals’ perceptions of themselves as good partners and parents. If individuals see themselves as being able to meet the challenge—such as to provide more economically or be sexually faithful—then it may lead to positive changes for the individual and family. But if not, it could cause them to distance themselves from their partner and children. For instance, men who see themselves as failing in their role as fathers reduce engagement with their children to protect themselves from that sense of failure or to “shield their children from their own personal failings” (Young 2011: 120).

As well, BSF participation and discussions may lead an individual to realize that the other partner’s expectations are different from what the individual had previously understood—or it may simply push those expectations to the fore. For instance, the sociologist Jennifer Hamer (2001) recounts the divergence between mothers’ expectations of fathers’ financial providership, in contrast with fathers’ own emphasis on providing social and emotional support to their children. Discussions of financial responsibility in the BSF sessions may lead a father to more vividly recognize that his partner has expectations that he is not meeting—an expectation to

which the curriculum will lend greater normative heft. If the father is unable or unwilling to fulfill the role, this may introduce conflict and, if the relationship ends, also alter perceptions of fault for the dissolution.

Prior work describes how high economic and relationship prerequisites for marriage deters the decision to marry (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Gibson-Davis, Edin, and McLanahan 2005; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005). A similar process could deter long-term non-marital relationships if the accepted expectations rise beyond what partners are able to meet. This process of challenging role definitions and expectations could apply to either fathers or mothers, but we propose that it is more likely to happen to fathers. It has been proposed that there are fewer “good” men who are ready to fill conventional roles as long-term partners or parents (Edin 2000; Wilson and Neckerman 1987). In part, this may be because severe poverty and social isolation impose greater obstacles on the fulfillment of traditional paternal responsibilities—bread-winning—than on traditional maternal responsibilities. While low-income women may find the motherhood role to be a source of satisfaction and domain in which they are able to meet social expectations (Edin and Kefalas 2005), low-income men may find their inability to provide for their families financially a source of shame and frustration (Jarrett et al. 2002; Nelson, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2002). For fathers, particularly, then, embracing mainstream beliefs and values of responsible fatherhood or hearing of their partner’s desires that they achieve these standards, may alter men’s own conceptions of their adequacy as fathers and partners. Recall that the fathers in the Baltimore BSF site were much more likely than fathers in other BSF sites to be unemployed at entry into the program. For these fathers, it may be difficult to change their circumstances to “step up” and match mainstream norms of bread-winning fatherhood.

In addition to influencing individuals’ views of themselves and their own responsibilities, we hypothesize that BSF could also affect individuals’ perceptions of their partners’ levels of

commitment in ways that may induce relationship instability. This could happen via the decision to participate rather than through the participation itself. In an environment where there are few formal markers of commitment, what seem like advances in the seriousness of a relationship (such as moving in together) frequently occur without explicit discussion or conscious decision making (Manning and Smock 2005). A partner's attitude toward attending sessions could therefore possess substantial signaling value regarding their level of commitment (Hawkins et al. 2011; Stanley, Rhoades, and Whitton 2011).

BSF program operators reported that it was relatively common for one partner (most often the father) to resist attending, while the other was more willing (Dion et al. 2006, 2010). The partner who is interested in attending may interpret the other partner's resistance to attend as a signal of lack of commitment to the relationship and willingness to sacrifice to improve it. In a circumstance where trust is high, the interested partner may not take resistance to attend BSF sessions to reflect a lack of commitment, especially if the other partner has potentially legitimate reasons to not attend—such as time constraints due to job or other commitments. But among the most disadvantaged couples, such reluctance seems more likely to activate suspended distrust. The decision of whether to actively participate in BSF thus could force a decision about the direction of the relationship. In the absence of the program, such a decision point not have occurred until later, and the relationship may have endured for a longer time.

### *Evidence for the Proposed Explanations*

We performed a set of analyses using survey data to test for evidence of the phenomena suggested by the preceding hypotheses. In order to examine whether the increased union dissolution was related to changes in perceived responsibilities of partners, we examined the reasons that Baltimore BSF group members gave for their union dissolutions, comparing those to

reasons given by couples from the control group. If the program increased dissolution by altering the meanings that participants attached to relationship roles and the expected behaviors of partners in ways that they may not have been able or willing to meet, then the attributions for dissolution should differ between the groups.

As a test of the hypothesis that the decision to actively participate in the program could induce union dissolution in some cases by raising doubt about a partner's commitment, we examine whether impacts are concentrated among the least committed segment of BSF couples in Baltimore. This should be the group that has established the least amount of trust between partners. In turn, individuals in those relationships would be expected to be the most likely to interpret a partner's reluctance to participate as a lack commitment to the relationship.<sup>9</sup>

In the BSF 15-month follow-up survey, individuals whose romantic relationship with their BSF partner had ended were asked to cite reasons for the break-up. Respondents asked about six potential reasons for dissolution that they could attribute to themselves and/or their partners. The questions were worded as follows: "I am going to read you a list of reasons that people give for why their relationships ended. For each reason, tell me if this is why your relationship with [PARTNER] ended. Was it because you, partner, or both of you:

- (1) Cheated or were unfaithful?
- (2) Went to jail or prison?
- (3) Were abusive or violent?
- (4) Used drugs or alcohol?
- (5) Could not keep a job or contribute enough financially to the family?
- (6) Were not a good parent or role model?

Respondents could select as many reasons as they felt were relevant. Because of very small counts in some of those responses, we summed across them to create the following measures of:

- (1) Whether the respondent faults the father at all

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<sup>9</sup> This test was suggested by Scott Stanley in a personal communication with the authors.

- (2) Whether the respondent faults only the father
- (3) The number of reasons that the respondent faults the father (0 to 6)
- (4) Whether the respondent faults the mother at all
- (5) Whether the respondent faults only the mother
- (6) The number of reasons that the respondent faults the mother (0 to 6)

The results in Table 4 are regression-adjusted group means for each of those measures.<sup>10</sup>

The means in the left-hand column are from analyses that include all Baltimore couples, irrespective of whether or not their relationship was intact at 15 months (420 fathers and 510 mothers). The figures presented therefore capture how frequently couples' relationships ended with fault attributed to the particular partner. Observations take a value of zero either if the relationship was still intact 15 months or if it had dissolved but the particular partner (the mother or father) was not faulted by the respondent. Consequently, those results are influenced both by the rate of union dissolution and reasons given for dissolution. However, we use this approach because the outcomes we examine are defined for all couples. Therefore, the analysis preserves the benefits of random assignment where research groups can be assumed to be initially equivalent, on average, and any differences between them that emerge and are too large to be due to chance can be attributed to the effect of the program.

The results in the right-hand column are from analyses limited to couples whose romantic relationship had ended by the time of the 15-month follow-up (100 fathers and 142 mothers). In contrast to the full-sample results, differences between groups reflect only differences in attributions for break-up, rather than both the rate of break-up and attributions. However, because the composition of the samples is determined by relationship dissolution, a post-random assignment factor that could be influenced by the intervention, the analysis is not experimental.

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<sup>10</sup> Although the random assignment design should produce fully equivalent samples (at least for the sample that includes all Baltimore couples), the regressions include a broad range of characteristics of partners and couples both to increase statistical precision and to adjust for any small differences that might emerge by chance or as a result of survey non-response. See Wood et al. (2010) for a full description of the analysis approach and covariates included in impact analyses.

**Table 4. Impact of the Baltimore BSF Program on Reasons Given for Marital Dissolution**

Characteristics	All Relationships (Experimental)		Dissolved Relationships (not experimental)	
	BSF Group	Control Group	BSF Group	Control Group
<b>Reasons Given by Father</b>				
Faults Father at all (%)	14***	6	58***	26
Faults Father, not Mother (%)	6*	2	23	10
Number of reasons given for faulting Father	0.23***	0.07	0.94***	0.26
Faults Mother at all (%)	10	8	40	35
Faults Mother, not Father (%)	2	4	6*	19
Number of reasons given for faulting Mother	0.16	0.10	0.69	0.35
<b>Reasons Given by Mother</b>				
Faults Father at all (%)	20*	15	63	62
Faults Father, not Mother (%)	19**	11	59	47
Number of reasons given for faulting Father	0.36	0.29	1.11	1.25
Faults Mother at all (%)	2	4	6*	17
Faults Mother, not Father (%)	0	0	1	2
Number of reasons given for faulting Mother	0.04	0.05	0.08*	0.25
<b>Sample Size</b>				
Fathers	202	218	53	47
Mothers	258	252	80	62

Source: BSF 15-month follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.

Note: Means are regression-adjusted. Observations are weighted for survey non-response. See (Wood et al. 2010b) for details on analysis methods.

\*\*\*/\*\*/\* Difference from control group mean is statistically significant at the .01/.05/.10 level.

The results do, in fact, show some rather dramatic differences between treatment and control groups in attributing fault for the end of the relationship. Specifically, romantic relationships in the BSF program group are much more likely to end with the father faulting himself than are control group relationships. In the experimental results covering all couples, 14 percent of romantic relationships in the comparison group ended with a dissolution in which the father faulted himself, compared to only 6 percent in the comparison group. And the average total count of reasons for fault attributed to fathers by fathers was three times greater among those in

the BSF group compared to those in the control group. Within dissolved relationships, fathers cite themselves as having at least part of the fault for the break-up in 58 percent of cases in the BSF group, compared to only 26 percent in the control group.

The differences are driven by a few specific areas of fault. The largest is that 19 percent of BSF fathers in dissolved relationships attribute the break-up at least in part to their inability to contribute enough financially to the family, compared to only 4 percent of fathers in dissolved control group relationships. This difference is statistically significant at conventional levels. Other substantively important differences appear in fathers' citing their own incarceration (15 percent in the BSF group versus 9 percent in the control group), substance abuse (9 percent versus 2 percent), and abusive behavior (9 percent versus 4 percent) at least in part for the end of the couple relationship. Group differences on each of those individual items were not statistically significant, but together they contribute to the overall differences observed in fathers' attributions in Table 4.<sup>11</sup>

These differences are particularly noteworthy because, with the exception of intimate partner violence, BSF did not affect the behaviors and outcomes in question (see Table 5). That is, BSF fathers were not any more likely than control group fathers in Baltimore to be unemployed, have been arrested, or have abused drugs or alcohol in the 15- months after random assignment. Their earnings were, on average, almost identical to the control group and Baltimore BSF fathers were actually less likely than control group fathers to have engaged in binge drinking in the prior year. Thus the BSF fathers' markedly higher propensity to view their own behavior as having contributed to the end of the relationship appears to be almost wholly due to

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<sup>11</sup> There were no substantively important differences between study groups in fathers' propensity to cite their own infidelity or parenting at a cause or relationship dissolution.

program impacts on how fathers perceive their own behavior, rather than to impacts on the behavior itself.

Regarding the possible exception of intimate partner violence, for which some harmful program impacts were found, it bears noting that BSF mothers in Baltimore were *not* more likely than control group mothers to cite abuse by the partner as a cause of relationship dissolution. Among all couples in both groups, 4 percent of relationships ended with the mother citing fathers’ abuse as a cause of the dissolution. Among mothers from dissolved relationships, 12 percent of those in the BSF group cited abuse by the partner as a cause, compared to 15 percent in the control group. Prior research has shown that the risk of violence to women increases during a separation (DeKeseredy, Rogness, and Schwartz 2004), and it may well be that the increased rate of intimate partner violence against mothers in the BSF group in Baltimore is a result of the relationship break-up, rather than a cause of it.

**Table 5. Estimated Impacts Of Building Strong Families On Fathers’ Behaviors and Outcomes Disproportionately Cited as Causes of Union Dissolution in Baltimore**

Outcome	BSF Group	Control Group	Estimated Impact	95% Confidence Interval	
				Upper	Lower
Father employed in the past month (%)	66.1	64.9	1.2	-8.2	10.5
Father’s earnings in the past year (\$)	12,365	12,682	-317	-2,835	2,201
Any binge drinking in the past year (%)	34.4	45.9	-11.5**	-21.6	-1.3
Substance use interfered with work, family, or social life (%)	12.8	13.4	-0.6	-7.7	6.4
Ever arrested since random assignment (%)	48.7	43.3	5.4	-5.5	16.3
<b>Sample Size</b>					
<b>Fathers (All outcomes other than arrests)</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>218</b>			
<b>Fathers (Arrests)</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>262</b>			

Source: BSF 15-month follow-up survey, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research.

Notes: In order to minimize potential under-reporting of interaction with the criminal justice system, the arrests measure is coded with a value of “1” if either the father or the mother reports that the outcome in question occurred. Multiple imputation is used to fill in the mothers’ response if the father, but not the mother responded to the 36-month survey. The sample size is higher for arrests because a value is present if either the father or the mother responded, rather than on father’s reports only. Further details on the construction of these measures are provided in Wood et al. (2010b).

\*\*\*/\*\*/\* Impact estimates are statistically significant at the .01/.05/.10 level, two-tailed test.

Mothers in the two study groups did not differ as dramatically as fathers in the reasons they cited for break-ups. If anything, mothers in the BSF group appear to have been somewhat less likely than control group mothers to fault themselves. In the analyses that include all couples, regardless of 15-month relationship status, BSF group mothers are more likely to fault the father and not themselves. As shown in Table 4, among all BSF group couples in Baltimore, 19 percent experienced a relationship dissolution by 15 months for which the mother faulted the father and not herself, versus 11 percent in the control group. And among mothers whose relationships ended, only 6 percent of those in the BSF group faulted themselves at all, compared to 17 percent in the control group. So, it is possible that participation in BSF also affected mothers' perceptions of appropriate behavior for the father. However, this difference is only marginally statistically significant, and there is no statistically significant difference between treatment and control groups in the proportion of all relationships that ended with a dissolution in which the mother cited herself as at fault.

Earlier we also hypothesized that the process of couples' deciding whether or not to attend group sessions could provide a signal to each partner of the other's commitment, which could induce union dissolution if partners disagreed about attending and one partner's reluctance was interpreted as a lack of relationship commitment. Because individuals in less established relationships are likely to have lower levels of trust between partners, we expect that the probability of that process undermining relationship stability would be greatest among the least established couples.

During the process of determining eligibility for the study, couples reported whether they were in a "steady" relationship or one that was only "on-again and off-again." In analyses we performed previously to examine the program's impacts on intimate partner violence, we found

the harmful program impacts concentrated among the 20 percent of couples in which at least one partner had reported at baseline that the couple's relationship was only off-and-on. Among couples in a steady relationship at baseline, 12 percent of BSF group mothers reported some severe physical assault in the 15 months after random assignment, compared to 9 percent of comparison group mothers—a difference that is not statistically significant. But among couples in an off-and-on relationship prior to study enrollment, 30 percent of BSF group mothers reported some severe physical assault, compared to 10 percent of control group mothers. The sample size is small, but the group difference is marginally statistically significant at  $p < 0.10$ .<sup>12</sup>

A similar analysis of relationship stability produces results that are less dramatic, but in a similar direction. Among couples who started in a steady relationship, 65 percent of the BSF group were still romantically involved at 15 months, compared to 74 percent in the control group—a nine percentage point difference that is marginally statistically significant ( $p < .10$ ). The magnitude of the difference is larger for on-and-off couples—22 percentage points—with only 36 percent of such couples in the BSF group remaining intact versus 58 percent of corresponding control group couples. The difference in impacts for steady versus on-and-off couples falls short of conventional standards for statistical significance. However, the magnitude of the impacts among on-and-off couples indicates that they disproportionately contribute to the overall negative effects of the BSF program on relationship stability in Baltimore. These results are consistent with the argument that the decision of whether or not to participate could raise concern about lack of commitment to the relationship among couples with the least established relationships in which little trust is likely to have developed.

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<sup>12</sup> In response to these findings, program eligibility rules were modified in Baltimore so that only when both partners described themselves as in a “steady romantic relationship” were they eligible for enrollment.

## **Conclusion**

The BSF demonstration found that the intervention had no effect overall on couple relationships at 15 months across the eight sites combined. In addition, BSF had little or no effect in most of the evaluation sites individually. However, BSF had a number of negative effects in Baltimore, increasing relationship dissolution and reducing the level of father involvement with children. Since these effects are the opposite of those intended by the intervention, the Baltimore results are initially a puzzle.

Knowledge of the site gained from the study's implementation analysis suggest that the pattern of impacts is most likely due to the uniquely disadvantaged set of couples recruited in Baltimore. This chapter has presented some theoretical perspectives on why this may have occurred, focusing on program impacts on treatment group members' views of themselves and their partners. In analyses presented here, we find that BSF caused fathers to be more likely to fault themselves for the end of the relationship. Importantly, they are more likely to blame themselves for failings like inability to contribute sufficiently financially and substance abuse, even though the program did not negatively affect fathers' actual employment, earnings, or use of alcohol or illicit drugs.

This finding is consistent with hypotheses that the definitions of partner and father roles encouraged by BSF may differ in important ways from the definitions previously adopted by participating fathers and, in turn, change their views of how well they are fulfilling those roles. If fathers adopt role re-definitions that force them to "step up" in responsibility—or if they perceive that their partners have adopted such expectations—and they feel unwilling or unable to do so, then this could precipitate relationship dissolution by causing the father to distance himself from the relationship. We would expect that the both size of the discrepancy between pre-existing and newly adopted role expectations and fathers' challenges in meeting those heightened

expectations to be more pronounced among Baltimore fathers because of their higher levels of unemployment and social isolation.

The fact that the program did not cause a similar change among mothers and, if anything, led them to be less likely to fault themselves for relationship dissolution, suggests that the gap between how participants had previously framed their relationship roles and the role definitions presented in BSF is much greater for fathers served by the program in Baltimore. Given the dismal economic prospects for the most disadvantaged men in the United States (Sum et al. 2011), like those served by Baltimore's Center for Urban Families, it is to be expected that many fathers would have tended to adopt role definitions that diminished expectations of their contributions in some aspects in order to maintain positive self-evaluations (Hamer 2001; Waller 2010).

The concentration of negative program effects among the least committed couples also suggests that the offer of services resulting from assignment to the treatment group could have forced a decision about the relationship that might not have occurred until later, which is particularly relevant for couples who had not had enough experience together to develop trust in the other and confidence in their commitment to the relationship (Fosse 2010). It is evident from the program's modest participation rates that many individuals were not highly motivated to participate, a fact that could heighten distrust that had been partially suspended by those individuals' more motivated partners.

In addition, the couples' outcomes may have been influenced not just by their own traits, but also by those of other participating couples. One factor noted earlier that has been cited as contributing to the positive impacts in Oklahoma is that it was the only site where married and unmarried couples were in the same classes. The more established couples may have served as role models and as sources of hope for couples in earlier relationship stages that they can

overcome the challenges they face in meeting high relationship expectations. In Baltimore, not only would there have been no married couples in the classes, but a larger proportion of unmarried couples would have been less established in their relationships than was the case in other sites. Challenges could well seem much more daunting among a group of unmarried couples with tenuous relationships, more obstacles to overcome, and fewer examples among them of success in doing so.

The results above are framed as being negative because they are contrary to the stated goals of the program, which aims to keep couples together. However, it is possible that the apparently negative impacts on relationship dissolution are not all harmful. The relationships of couples targeted by the program face a high risk of dissolution with or without the BSF program. As we have seen, this is particularly true of the couples enrolled in Baltimore. Inducing partners to actively consider the status of their relationship and reexamine their roles within it may simply speed up the dissolution of relationships that would have ended before too long in any event. In some cases it may be better for that to occur sooner rather than later, and it is possible that the re-examinations may lead to better re-partnering outcomes. The negative impacts on father involvement in Baltimore—in particular the likelihood that fathers regularly spend time with their children and provide them with substantial financial support—raise concerns. However, it is notable that in spite of these effects, we find no evidence that the Baltimore program adversely affected the economic well-being of the children of participating couples. In particular, children of BSF couples in Baltimore were no more likely than children of control group couples to be living in poverty at the 15-month follow-up or to be living in households that were receiving public assistance or that had experienced material hardship in the past year (Wood et al. 2010b).

Although in some cases an accelerated relationship break-up is the best outcome for those involved, ideally the intervention would provide tools allowing most couples to overcome

obstacles faced. In addition to the core relationship skills curriculum, BSF did attempt to provide or arrange a variety of supportive services—such as employment and mental health counseling—to help unmarried couples meet the challenges to their relationships. It is possible that, in addition to providing relationship skills training and other services that directly attack problems, future iterations of relationship skills interventions could also focus more on ways to “fram[e]...challenges as more tractable, to create a shared identity as a couple who can ‘beat the odds’” (Waller 2010:120). The Baltimore results also suggest that future programs may be strengthened by providing supports for couples dealing with relationship breakups and their aftermath, services designed to minimize the risk of intimate partner violence in the context of relationship breakup and to maintain father involvement after relationships end.

The fact that the program’s impacts could largely reflect acceleration in the timing of break-ups that would eventually have occurred, suggests that over time the negative impacts on relationship stability in Baltimore might fade dramatically or reverse. Alternatively, it is possible that the Baltimore sample’s results will persist in longer-term follow-ups. And if the Baltimore couples’ characteristics that make them especially sensitive to the risk of program-induced dissolution are shared to lesser extents by couples in other sites, it is possible that over the longer term we may begin to observe similar if less pronounced results more broadly in the study.

The results presented here support the call by the sociologists Laura Tach and Kathy Edin (2011) for greater emphasis in qualitative research on how low-income men “learn to enact the roles of partner and father” (p. 83), how trust and commitment develop in low income relationships, and how couples’ differing perceptions of self and partner affect relationship stability. This is particularly important for researchers evaluating the effects of relationship and

marriage education programs serving low income couples, since these programs have not yet shown the positive impacts that have been observed among more advantaged populations.<sup>13</sup>

Around the time of their child's birth, low income young fathers express high hopes for their relationships with the child and mother. But they face steep challenges in meeting responsibilities as partners and fathers. Family is not an independent institution, but is inextricably linked to other institutions, including school, work, criminal justice, and child support. In order to be successful, programs that attempt to promote father involvement and positive couple relationships do need to be able to convince young fathers of the importance of stepping up to higher levels of responsibility. But it is important that the steps fathers are encouraged to take are ones that they have both the means to achieve and a belief in their achievability. Only comprehensive programs that are able to succeed in addressing multiple structural hindrances, along with cultural beliefs, are likely to be able to increase relationship stability and father involvement. Without sufficient attention to addressing both what fathers perceive as achievable and what they can realistically achieve, fathers may step back rather than up.

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<sup>13</sup> Mathematica recently began an ACF-sponsored study of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Grantees, which includes an intensive qualitative study of couples to help shed important light on those types of questions.

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