

Exploring the Role of Fathers in the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Supplemental Nutrition Program

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Background

- The Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Nutrition Assistance program provides education, medical screenings and nutrition subsidies to pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, as well as to children up to five years of age
- While WIC has improved maternal and child health, there are still a number of **health inequities** in the population served
 - Low-birthweight births
 - Premature births
 - 42%** of costs associated with low birthweight and premature births assumed by **Medicaid**
 - Average hospital stay is **12.9 days for premature births versus 1.9** for a standard birth
 - Low rates of breastfeeding initiation and continuation
- While **men are ineligible to receive benefits**, research suggests that **men can play an influential role in birthing, breastfeeding, and early childhood outcomes**
 - A systematic review illustrated how pregnant women residing with the father of the their unborn child would be more likely to obtain prenatal care
 - A study regarding childhood development, correlated paternal participation during pregnancy and infancy with long-term father accessibility
- There are gaps in the literature regarding the role that WIC plays in **incorporating, fostering, and advocating for the male role** during pregnancy, breastfeeding, and early childhood in ensuring those same outcomes
- Primary goal of this research is to understand the **experiences, expectations and attitudes** of fathers regarding WIC

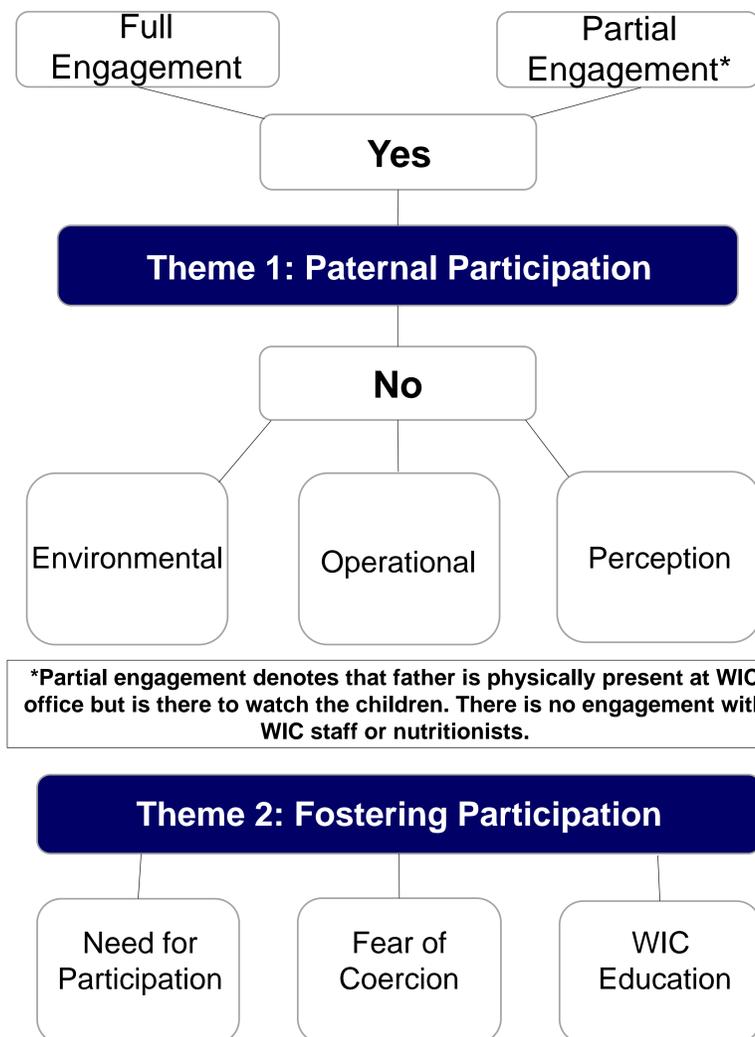
Specific Aims

- To document the experiences, expectations and attitudes of men with enrolled WIC-qualifying partners or children towards methods of recruitment and enrollment, interactions with WIC administration and personnel, and WIC-Education course content, quality, and relevance
- To identify administrative policies, procedures and intentions of the WIC program to meet the needs of men, specifically single-fathers
- To elucidate and document the experiences of fathers in negotiating WIC vouchers at authorized WIC vendors

Methods

- This study employed a convergent mixed methods design combining quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) components.
- Couples were recruited for study participation using advertisements (flyers) and face-to-face recruitment at WIC offices in Southeastern Pennsylvania and Southern New Jersey
 - To ensure confidentiality of responses, men and women were interviewed separately
- A member of the study team administered a demographics survey and semi-structured interview with all study participants.
- Interview results were reviewed via manual thematic analysis and verified by NVivo 10 software.

Emergent Themes



Study Population

- Surveys and semi-structured interviews were completed with **16** individuals; **8** couples
- Mean age: 32 years (Men: 33 years; Women: 31.5 years)
- 81% African-American; 19% Caucasian
- 44% with at least some college education
- Mean household (HH) size: 5; Mean number of HH members on WIC: 2

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Results

- Only **2 of 8 fathers** were fully engaged with WIC, meaning they were present and engaged in the program
- Lack of paternal participation may be related to **WIC policies**, such as hours of operation and the environment of WIC offices

"her appointments are when I'm working and I'm not going to miss work to go to a WIC appointment" - 37, father of 5

"they haven't been open at times that were convenient for me" -35, father of 3

"change name of WIC to better reflect male inclusion; just the name can make men feel uncomfortable" - 38, father of 3

- Offices were not seen as **welcoming** to men

"they don't make the male uncomfortable, but they're expecting a female" - 38, father of 3

"feel kind of uncomfortable, like I'm not supposed to be there" - 38, father of 3

- Misconceptions about WIC and its **correlation with welfare** were also cited as obstacles to participation

"a lot of males think WIC is part of welfare...some people think welfare is bad; women see it as help, men don't" - 33, mother of 3

"that's the place where she gets the milk..." - 26, father of 2

"fathers are playing an important role and that's sometimes an ignored role...men have big effect on WIC" - 38, father of 2

- Fathers **want and need** to be included

"men feel like they don't get credit as a parent; domino effect where the father feels touched by the program...lifts his entire family" - 31, mother of 3

- WIC-Education** is one method to facilitate **inclusion** of mothers and fathers

"I can see having like a lot of classes available and then having some that are specifically geared towards the dads...this is the right environment for them to be learning about it" - 37, mother of 2

- But fathers feel threatened with **fears of coercion**, rather than being given the choice to participate in WIC programs

"WIC should not play role in increasing father involvement, it's being forced...WIC could use hype, perks; must be voluntary" - 35, father of 3

Discussion

- Study demonstrates that there are multiple opportunities within WIC to expand paternal participation
 - Operationally – hours operation; gender competency in WIC staff
 - Environmentally – office, social media, and branding of WIC literature
 - Perceptually – overcoming misconceptions that WIC is welfare, fears of coercion, and that WIC is nothing more than a provider of milk and formula