Young fathers have traditionally been largely cast aside by society and continue to be targets of harmful stereotypes that depict them as irresponsible young men who carelessly get their partners pregnant, callously abandon them and their children and eschew financial responsibility. While research on young fathers is limited, these negative societal depictions contradict data that shows that most young fathers have a genuine desire to be proactively involved in their children’s lives and their involvement in playing with and caring for their children is not significantly different from adult fathers.

Furthermore, while adolescent parenthood is vilified as a whole, the success stories we hear from time to time only feature young mothers, and completely dismiss the many young fathers who are actively involved with their children, and who are invested in their children's future. CLRJ’s Justice for Young Families (J4YF) initiative, which promotes the health, equity and dignity of young families, intentionally includes young fathers and their experiences in the discussions around adolescent pregnancy in order to re-frame how society treats and portrays adolescent parents. As part of the J4YF Issue Brief series, CLRJ conducted
What does it mean to be “involved”? What makes a father a father?

Many of the Latino young fathers in our focus groups face incredible challenges. Similar to research among young Latina mothers, these challenges—poverty, substandard education, limited job opportunities, immigrant status, being incarcerated/formerly incarcerated—impacted young fathers before they became parents, not because they became parents. And while these challenges are not unique to young fathers—the Latino community as a whole experiences these inequities—they present even bigger hardships when a child is in the picture.

And yet despite these challenges, similar to young mothers, ALL of the young fathers expressed refocusing on school and establishing goals to prepare for their future and the future of their children. Many said that they stopped “hanging with the wrong crowd” and became more responsible by reassessing their priorities. Although they expressed frustration and feeling stressed at not being able to provide for their child financially, they pointed to other ways of being actively involved—both emotionally and physically.

The young fathers recognized that being involved meant “being there” for their children and included nurturing activities like loving their children, spending time with them, changing diapers, preparing meals, reading, taking them to the park and playing, as well as other child rearing responsibilities.

Additionally, many young fathers demonstrated various forms of support prior to the birth of their children. One young man stated he ...“was present through all the pregnancy, the nine months, the appointments, everything...” An expecting father shared this exchange with his dad: “Just sometimes like when I tell my dad I’m going to go the hospital to go with her, he’s like ‘Well, at least you’re doing something it’s better than I was.’ My dad didn’t get to do anything ’cause he was just working all the time, so he said that’s something good for the relationship between me and her.” Additionally, the young fathers all stated they were present when their children were born—even if they were/are not in a relationship with the mother and/

“They always show the dad as the bad guy, but they do stuff [for their child] too, you know?”
or in spite of strained relationships with their children’s mother’s families. The majority of the young men felt that the family (mostly the mothers) of their children’s mom did not want them to be present at the birth.

The scant research on young fathers rarely shows how they felt when they learned they were going to be fathers or how they felt when they saw their child for the first time. We found that their emotions, feelings and hopes for their children were not that different from older parents.

In fact, many displayed a sense of vulnerability. Their reactions ranged from “scared” and “surprised” to “excited.” One young father even expressed feeling embarrassed. And some young fathers expressed also wanting to make their parents proud.

“For me, when I found out...one thing was how am I going to provide for my child but also to make sure that my mom and dad are still proud of me for being a young father and making sure I become a successful man for my child. But I was also kind of stuck too, the first couple of months [not knowing what to do].”

“...I remember that day like it was yesterday, man. I will never forget.”

Interestingly, the findings of a study comparing adolescent fathers with adult fathers indicate that young fathers report feeling more attached to their child than adult fathers in terms of both talking and thinking about the child.4

Financial responsibility and being pushed out of school

The majority of the young fathers felt pressure to drop out of school since they felt they needed to provide financial support. This pressure to provide financially, however, can be detrimental in the long term, given that if they are able to find a job, it will most likely not be steady and will be part-time and/or a low-wage job5 due to their limited schedule as students or because of their low educational attainment. This is not only true for young fathers – 38% of men between the ages of 16-19 in California’s civilian labor force are unemployed.6

As we consider the financial picture of young Latino fathers, it is imperative that we recognize that many Latino men in general—particularly if they are poor—have limited educational opportunities, which in turn limits their income and earning opportunities. In 2014, 23% of high school graduates in California were Latinos.7 Furthermore, for Latino men age 25 and older, 42% did not have a high school diploma—only 26% had a high school diploma or GED.8 Given that the ability to secure quality jobs hinges in large part on the level of educational attainment and the quality of the education Latinos receive, it is not surprising that in 2014, Latinos were more likely to live in poverty (0-199% FPL) at 59% as compared to Black men (39%), Asian men (28%) and white men (18%).9 While we need to make certain that Latinos, including young fathers, gain and maintain steady employment and economic stability, it is important that this job pays a living and thriving wage.
For many of the students who plan to stay in high school, the negative attitudes of school officials as well as classmates may serve as catalysts and end up pushing them out eventually.

“There’s teachers that bring you down sometimes. They see you differently while you’re in class…They treat you differently sometimes from other students… Like if you’re not paying attention in class, they’ll just bring that up. They use it against you and there’s some dads out there that feel embarrassed, you know. They feel embarrassed from the criticism they get from other students. Other students find out [about the pregnancy] and they just start talking. They’re saying stuff that isn’t necessary and just bring the young dad’s hopes down.”

“Yeah, and sometimes it can be the counselors. Because as teachers find out, they send you to the counselors. And then the counselors start talking to you and they start thinking of ideas of what you should do or when my counselor found out that I was going to be a dad, as soon as he found out, I was moved schools… He felt I should be at a home school. I’m guessing he knew I was going to get criticized, and he thought I’d get bullied. He just made that choice…At that moment I didn’t know what to do, so I just agreed with him. Once I was at the homeschool, I was like, man, this is really hard. I wish I was back at my regular school…I think…even before, I was having problems with the vice principal, as they found out, they used it as an excuse, they used the kid as an excuse to literally let me go.”

“Instead of the school trying to help you out, they don’t really understand the fact that you’re going to have a kid…Yeah, some teachers do and then there’s some that just criticize you and don’t see you for who you are and what you’ve been doing. I think if they did really support me, I’d still be in regular high school, but unfortunately, I didn’t get that help.”

While the exact number of young fathers is not readily available, it is likely that school officials will encounter a pregnant or parenting youth, if not several. As such, school officials must become more knowledgeable about the experiences and perceptions of all young parents—including young fathers—to assist them during this critical time and encourage them to stay in school. School counselors in particular play a vital role in ensuring that the young father is focused on graduating from high school and in pursuing post-secondary education and/or securing stable employment.
CONCLUSION

“Like me, I didn’t know how to be a dad, but I’m here being a dad, I’m doing whatever I can. And I’m doing it my way because it’s the only way I can do it.”

While our sample is small, it is very rich in information. The narratives of these participants provide insight into what some Latino young fathers are going through. Although young fathers hear loud and clear the punitive messages that society as a whole is sending them, they show incredible resilience. Without generalizing, these findings illustrate that contrary to stereotypical portrayals—these young fathers expressed enthusiasm about being actively involved in their children’s daily lives and expressed renewed focus on educational attainment to provide a better future for themselves and their children.

Our findings also reveal reasons that deter or discourage young fathers from being involved. While young fathers express a strong desire to be actively involved with their child, the pressure to provide financial support may lead them to check out completely. These findings support prior research, which indicated that a predictor of young father involvement lies in his ability to provide financial support. Additionally, the hostile relationship with their children’s mother’s family can also lead to severed involvement as discussed by a number of young fathers.

“Like me, I didn’t know how to be a dad, but I’m here being a dad, I’m doing whatever I can. And I’m doing it my way because it’s the only way I can do it.”

In order for me to see him, I need to help him out. I don’t want to show up with empty hands like, ‘Oh, I want to see my son.’”

“I guess my thought is the mom is going to think, “What? You haven’t been here for a while and you just show up trying to see your son?”

Finally, while there are young fathers who are not involved, our findings are supported by prior research that indicates that the majority of young fathers not only express the desire to take on the role of being a father and be responsible for their child, but they are actually doing it. As such, we as a society must do better to ensure young fathers thrive and that we shift how we speak of and depict young fathers. It is time to stop casting young fathers aside.
RECOMMENDATIONS:

“Yeah, sometimes we don’t understand how coming from someone like a mentor who hasn’t experienced it versus someone who has experienced it and they’re stepping up and you’re seeing how they changed their life. So when you look up to him you’re like, ‘Damn he’s a young dad and he changed his life...you just see it and say I want to be like him, or I want to step it up like he did.”

As a reproductive justice policy organization, we strongly believe our government plays a critical role in addressing the needs of all youth, including young fathers. Traditionally, most school-based and/or agency-based programs for young parents either offered more services to young mothers than to young fathers, or did not offer any services to young fathers at all. And while young mothers and fathers face similar challenges, services for young fathers cannot just be added onto existing programs for mothers—they must be tailored towards the needs of young fathers. The recommendations provided here, though not comprehensive, are based on the needs expressed by the young fathers in the focus groups and aimed to help schools, government officials, agencies, service providers and funders to improve and expand efforts to support these young men in their role as parents.

- Provide information, educational options counseling, and support to complete high school or obtain a GED.
- Provide workforce development such as vocational education, job readiness training, and job placement;
- Create public-private partnerships that incentivize the hiring of young people, including young parents;
- Provide parenting education, including providing information on parental rights and skills-building around improving co-parenting relationships and healthy relationships in general;
- Ensure access to health care services and information, including access to sexual and reproductive health services;
- Ensure full implementation of comprehensive sexual education through Education Code 51930-51939;
- Facilitate peer support groups and provide adult mentors;
- Facilitate and ensure access to childcare services; and,
- Ensure access to housing and transportation services.

Additionally, California must reinstate, continue to invest and increase funding to programs that benefit young fathers, including Male Involvement Programs and Information and Education Programs.11

Just as important as providing services and resources is the need to move away from harmful biases towards young fathers and commit to supporting them. For young fathers and their families to thrive, we must all shift how we speak of and depict young families.
ENDNOTES


6 U.S Census Bureau, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.


8 U.S Census Bureau, 2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.


11 Information and Education programs provide youth with comprehensive, medically accurate sexual health education and clinical linkages to sexual and reproductive health services.
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Principal Author: Ena Suseth Valladares, MPH
Editors: Marisol Franco and Susy Chávez Herrera
Designers: Micah Bazant & Querido Galdo

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Justice for Young Families (J4YF) is a long-term initiative that champions young people’s rights to self-determination and bodily autonomy, including their decisions about whether or not to become parents, as well as their right to parent the children they have within a supportive environment. J4YF promotes the health, equity, opportunity and dignity of young families and is directly informed by the experiences of young parents as well as by the individuals that serve them. This initiative raises the most pressing needs for young mothers and fathers and acknowledges that young people’s ability to determine how they parent and sustain their families is directly linked to the oppressive conditions they face in our communities – racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, classism and xenophobia, among others. J4YF calls for a shift in our culture, communities and society to uplift and improve the lives of all youth. By working alongside parenting, pregnant, and non-parenting youth, J4YF works towards policies that promote the health, equity and dignity of young families.

California Latinas for Reproductive Justice (CLRJ) is a statewide organization committed to honoring the experiences of Latinas to uphold our dignity, our bodies, sexuality, and families. We build Latinas’ power and cultivate leadership through community education, policy advocacy, and community-informed research to achieve reproductive justice.

Post Office Box 861766
Los Angeles, CA 90086
phone: (213) 270-5258  |  email: info@clrj.org  |  website: www.clrj.org
Facebook: www.facebook.com/CALatinasforReproductiveJustice
Twitter: @Latinas4RJ  |  Instagram: @Latinas4RJ