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The American Guaranteed Income Studies: Columbia, South Carolina

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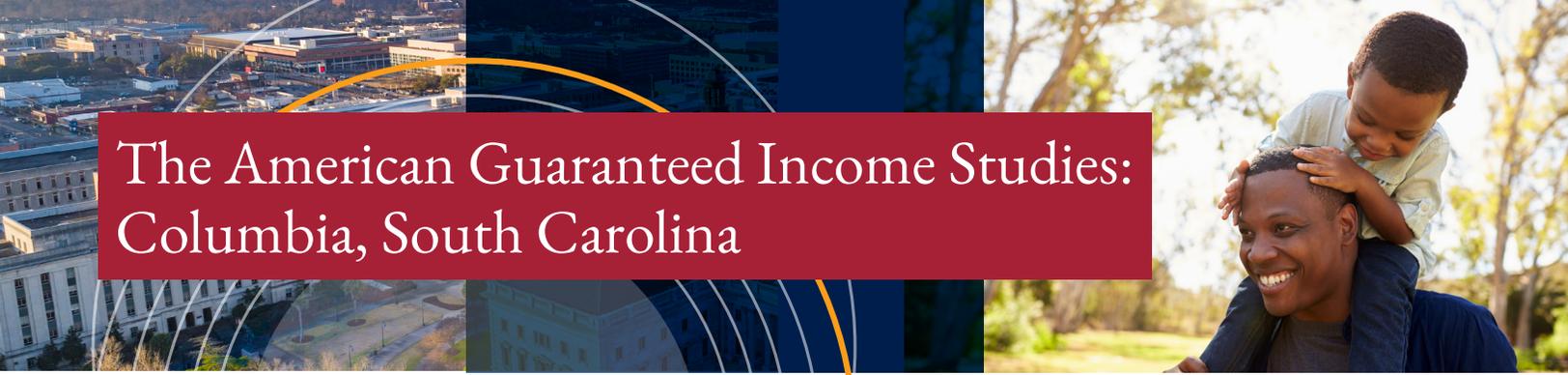


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Front Cover Image: Skyline of downtown Columbia, South Carolina from above Jarvis Klapman Blvd (Source: Shutterstock, Sean Pavone).

Inside Cover Image: Father carrying son on shoulder as they walk in the park.



The American Guaranteed Income Studies: Columbia, South Carolina

Executive Summary

In June 2021, the Columbia, South Carolina's City Council voted to approve the Columbia Life Improvement Monetary Boost (CLIMB) program that was implemented by the Midlands Fatherhood Coalition (MFC). Funded by Mayors for a Guaranteed Income and the Central Carolina Community Foundation, and spearheaded by Mayor Steve Benjamin, the program provided unconditional guaranteed income (GI) payments of \$500 per month for 12 months to fathers residing in the 29203 and 29223 zip codes. Individuals were eligible to apply if they were a father living in the target area and were a current or former client of MFC, a local nonprofit that has provided supportive services to fathers in the area since 1998.

The Center for Guaranteed Income Research (CGIR) conducted a mixed-methods Randomized Controlled Trial to evaluate CLIMB; it randomly assigned 100 caregivers to the treatment arm and 130 caregivers to the control arm. Both groups had similar demographic characteristics; all were fathers, and most were African American or Black, with an average age of approximately 38 years. The mean annual household income at baseline was \$21,222 for the treatment group and \$20,207 for the control group—less than half of the Area Median Income for Columbia at the time.

The CLIMB evaluation was guided by the following primary research question: how does GI affect participants' quality of life; work; subjective sense of self; and relationships with self, children, and others? For both treatment and control participants, CGIR administered compensated research activities consisting of four longitudinal surveys from Baseline to Endline and semi-structured interviews at the midpoint of the CLIMB program. A summary of the overall findings followed by more specific findings separated into research question subparts are contained below.

Summary of Findings

Taken together, the findings of this report illustrate the compounded effects of financial precarity, structural racism, and exploitative institutions on the overall well-being of Black fathers. GI recipients had greater courage than those in the control group, as well as greater aptitude to envision a different future and make plans to realize it. Receipt of the GI did allow fathers to attain greater food security and quality. They maintained their full-time employment at higher rates than those in the control group, yet could see no way out of working conditions that were perceived as exploitative and underpaid.

As many fathers were non-custodial parents, most owed child support or other court-ordered obligations of approximately \$300 per month, or 60% of the monthly GI payment, which may have diluted the near-term, individual impacts of GI receipt. Whether through mandated child support



payments or the desire to provide for their children, fathers overwhelmingly spent the GI on their children. As one participant put it, “it’s really their money, it’s not the parents’ money or the father’s money, it’s the kids’ money.”

Over time, fathers receiving the GI did report lower income volatility than those in the control group. Their financial precarity and sense of duty and purpose as a father required them to focus on providing for basic needs, rather than saving for the future. Fathers in the treatment group reported higher psychological distress than fathers in the control group at all points of data collection. However, all participants’ psychological distress scores hovered around 18, below the cutoff of 20, indicating they were likely to be mentally well.

While overall stress was in a healthy range, fathers in the treatment group reported a tremendous sense of stress and pressure related to showing up as a parent, and this may have been exacerbated by managing new resources in the context of a system that always seemed stacked against them. However, ensnared in the justice system, excluded from some safety net benefits, and owing most of their GI to the state, treatment group fathers generally accepted their current conditions and were deeply committed to supporting their children’s better futures.

KEY FINDINGS - AT A GLANCE

Fathers receiving the GI were more likely to maintain full-time employment than those that did not receive it.

GI helped smooth income volatility and promoted food security.

On average, men paid approximately \$300, or 60% of the guaranteed income, for monthly child support or other court ordered obligations.

Despite moderate economic gains, treatment group fathers had higher levels of stress and were more limited by physical health problems than those in control.

Acknowledgements

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**MAYORS FOR A
GUARANTEED
INCOME**

Founded by Michael D. Tubbs, MGI is a coalition of mayors advocating for a guaranteed income to lift all of our communities and build a more resilient, just America. Since launching in 2020, MGI has grown its ranks from 11 to over 125 mayors, supported the launch of 50-plus guaranteed income pilots across the country, and delivered more than \$250 million in direct, unconditional relief to everyday Americans. MGI has also launched two affiliates, Counties for a Guaranteed Income and United for a Guaranteed Income Action Fund. MGI's work has ensured that guaranteed income spreads from a single moment in Stockton, CA to a national movement—pushing the conversation forward in cities, state capitals, and Congress.

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Savannah, Georgia, featuring a prominent domed building (the Georgia State Capitol) in the foreground. The city extends into the distance under a clear blue sky. The image is split vertically, with the left side showing the full scene and the right side being a dark blue overlay containing the table of contents.

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Background

Strikingly wide roads, uncommon for a colonial city, etch out the urban grid of downtown Columbia, SC. Flanked by the Congaree River on the west and situated between the Piedmont foothills of the Appalachian Mountains and the Atlantic coastal plain, Columbia has been, since its founding, a liminal place that is in-between—a compromise. When originally constructed, Columbia was the nation's first planned capital city, and the second capital city of South Carolina (Moore, 2022). While the city's grid was criticized in the late 1700s as boring—especially when compared to the diagonal axis and intricate roundabouts of L'Enfant's Washington, DC—it served its purpose as a utilitarian bridge in the midlands between the historical “lowland” powerbrokers of Charleston, and an emergent community of farmers “upstate” (Helsley, 2015). Today, the main thoroughfares of Assembly Street and Gervais Street intersect at the state capitol building grounds, on which, from 1961 until 2015, a Confederate flag proudly flew. Gervais, once named “the ugliest street in America” by National Geographic, has undergone significant urban redevelopment and is now considered part of the Vista district, and one of the city's hubs for arts and entertainment. Outside of the colonial downtown, the planned grid dissipates. Urban expansion turns into sprawling suburban communities constructed in the 1970s, byproducts of the city's history of redlining and white flight (Columbia Compass, 2024; Deas-Moore, 2000).

A three-hour drive east from Atlanta, and a two-hour drive northwest from Charleston, SC, the site was selected for its centrality. Until Columbia's founding in 1786, the administrative capital of South Carolina was Charleston, populated by Anglo-Europeans, often from the Caribbean, and enslaved peoples who had been brought over from Africa. Dislocations caused by the French and Indian War prompted a new wave of immigrants into the state, traveling south from Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Rather than continuing the long journey to Charleston, which sits on the coast, these migrants settled in the midlands where the Congaree and Wateree rivers meet. The isolation of this territory fomented power struggles between the Indigenous Congaree, new settlers, and a growing population of both enslaved and freed Black residents. At the same time, the governor of South Carolina was concerned that the population of the colony—the majority of which was enslaved—put South Carolina at risk for slave rebellions. And so, to “protect and equalize” the population, the governor asked the crown to approve new townships across the midlands to attract additional White settlers—specifically

Protestant immigrants from Europe (Helsely, 2015). While his efforts were moderately successful, they also shifted the balance of power in the state, as more upstate and midlands residents demanded representation.

Columbia, named for the female embodiment of the United States, whom poet Phillis Wheatley once described as the personification of Liberty, became the first of 19 other cities in the US to bear this name (McBride, 2022). The historical contradictions of liberty in Columbia help define what the city is today. Cotton production, related textile manufacturing, and export became some of the main drivers of economic production in the area. As a result, slavery was foundational to the region. However, from the days of its establishment, Columbia had a significant free Black population, and by the 1850s, one could find free Black residents living throughout the city, and roughly half of the overall population was Black. While Columbia's economic engine was built on the cotton mills and easy access to transportation via the canal, it was also emerging as a city of education and social mobility. In 1805, South Carolina College (which would later become the University of South Carolina) was founded to rival the elite colleges of the northeast and provide education for sons of wealthy White landowners. By 1870 and 1880 respectively, Allen University and Benedict College, two of the earliest historically Black colleges and universities in the southern US, had also been established (Deas-Moore, 2000; Helsely, 2015).

In 1865, General Sherman razed a pathway through the city, marking the end of the Civil War and the beginning of Reconstruction—a period of incredible flourishing for the city's Black residents. During this time, the state university desegregated (only to resegregate during Jim Crow), and Black residents took control of the state government and held many prominent positions in the city. Black enterprises thrived and laid the groundwork for the emergence of a Black middle and upper class. Despite the end of Reconstruction, in the early 1900s the Black population of Columbia continued to grow economically, allowing for the emergence of a “resilient Black community and business district in the midst of segregation” (Brooks, 2023). Washington Street, just two blocks north of Gervais Street, became known as the city's Black Wall Street. The Waverly neighborhood, northeast of the state capital, was populated by Black homeowners and professionals, and the Good Samaritan Waverly Hospital, founded in 1920 to care for Black patients, was staffed by Black doctors and provided the only training facility exclusively for Black nurses. As a result, Black-owned enterprises like grocery stores, restaurants, pharmacies, and barbershops were prominent between the 1900s and the 1980s (Brooks, 2023).

The flourishing of Columbia's Black residents began fading between the 1960s and 1980s as urban renewal programs administered by the federal government to eradicate “slums” and “blight” targeted lower-income, predominately Black communities. Entire neighborhoods were lost to the renewal process, their residents displaced, their residences torn down to make way for industrial or business districts (Columbia Compass, 2024). Contemporaneous practices of redlining limited homeownership in historically Black communities, and White flight into the newly developing suburbs meant significant urban divestment. Perhaps not coincidentally, 1970 was also the year South Carolina began court-mandated integration of its public schools. These simultaneous processes had a stagnating effect on the social mobility of the city's Black residents, and their impacts can be felt in contemporary Columbia and in the narratives of Black men who participated in this pilot.

While Columbia and the surrounding metropolitan area is one of the most racially diverse regions of South Carolina, it is also geographically segregated. Through the 1980s and 1990s, Columbia experienced population decline. While adjacent Richland and Lexington Counties experienced population increases during this time, indicating a move from urban to suburban settings, who moved where was largely determined by race. Today, Lexington County is overwhelmingly White, while northern Columbia and southern Richland are predominantly Black communities. Downtown Columbia, the site of earlier “renewal,” is becoming an increasingly White space, while Black residents are being pushed to the peripheries of the city. Unemployment and poverty levels map similarly onto the city, with the highest rates of unemployment experienced in the northern part of the city and concentrated within the Black community. The impact of these structural divestments left Black families scrambling for economic security against steep odds and motivated Mayor Benjamin to test the idea of whether unconditional cash, in the form of GI, could potentially turn the tide in the lives of men left behind by Columbia’s progress.

The CLIMB pilot study, funded by the Mayors for a Guaranteed Income and the Central Carolina Fatherhood Coalition, was initiated to better understand the potential impacts of receiving GI for non-custodial fathers. Executed in collaboration with the MFC, the pilot examined the health, financial, and child well-being outcomes for men and their children over the course of the 12-month study. MFC has been working with fathers in the area since 1998 to assist them in positively supporting and engaging with their families. In line with that goal, this pilot study asks how the financial empowerment of non-custodial fathers can work to address underlying issues of poverty, inequity, and family instability. All study participants resided in two Columbia zip codes, both of which have high levels of poverty, particularly for single parents, and are majority Black communities. Evident within the CLIMB pilot design and data are both the historical realities of racial disenfranchisement in Columbia, and the simultaneous strength, vitality, and wealth of experience within the local Black community.



Context and Demographics

Columbia has a population of nearly 140,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a), positioning it as the state's second most populous urban center behind the city of Charleston (South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce, 2022). Over the past decade, the city has grown by 5.69%, energizing the city's once slow and quiet downtown and fostering robust economic development (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a). Although individuals who identify as non-Hispanic (NH) White constitute the plurality of the population (47.9%), Columbia is majority-minority city (NH Black only: 40.7%; Hispanic/Latinx only: 5.2%; NH Asian only: 2.3%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a). Many households in the city live on annual incomes around \$54,095, which is below the nation's median household income of \$75,149, with a poverty rate of 24.2%—more than double the nation's 11.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023a; U.S. Census Bureau, 2023b). Poverty rates in Columbia and across the country affect a family's household constellation.

NON-RESIDENTIAL FATHERS

Nationally, there are more than 9.7 million parents not living with one or more of their children under age 18 (Landers, 2021). A majority of these non-residential parents are fathers, one-third of whom are low-income and do not participate in labor force activities (Landers, 2021). Despite these economic challenges, most report paying some amount toward their child support obligations (Landers, 2021). Child support is defined by governments and bureaucratic structures as a social entitlement program wherein non-residential parents are mandated to provide monetarily toward the rearing of their legal or biological child (Natalier & Hewitt, 2010). The amount a non-residential parent must pay is based on income or a standardized imputed amount if the parent does not have a regular income (South Carolina Department of Social Services, 2014). The obligation to provide these resources is enforced by the state, with legal consequences ranging from the suspension of state-issued licenses (e.g., driver's, fishing, hunting, etc.), fines, and jail time (Cammatt, 2011). State-level child support enforcement is federally mandated, passed under the assumption that regular child support payments from non-residential parents would reduce childhood poverty and ease the government's, and thereby the tax payers', responsibilities for supporting low-income families by reducing the welfare rolls (Cammatt, 2011). Despite state-level child support enforcement efforts, any additional money from the non-residential parent often remains with the government, offsetting any public benefits received by the residential parent (Pate, 2005).

While some child support policies are mandated on a federal level, some are state specific. South Carolina is one of many states to enact a law (see Paternity and Child Support, 2015) requiring that residential parents seek child support before they are eligible to apply for safety net benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Child support payments are legally mandated for non-residential putative fathers whether or not they are married to the residential mother while also being the child's biological parent. For those in the latter category, the court will order and pay for a genetic test to establish the biological relationship between the putative father and child. The unmarried biological non-residential father has no parental rights to the child until after the genetic test confirms their biological relationship. Once paternity is established, the father must pay 50% of

all medical bills and ongoing child support payments from birth (Paternity and Child Support, 2015). In other words, South Carolina fathers who are not married to their child's mother do not have their names on their children's birth certificates and have no legal rights to their child, including visitation, until they establish paternity through the state. If a father does not establish paternity with the state, then their children can be legally adopted without their notification or consent.

Some fathers face significant barriers in paying child support. Many non-resident parents are economically vulnerable, with around 35% being low-income, 23% having not completed high school, and 73% not having full-time, year-round employment (Landers, 2021). Systemic racism in the form of persistent poverty for Black men also acts as a barrier for child support payment (Pate, 2005). For economically vulnerable parents in particular, labor market outcomes factor heavily into whether child support is paid successfully. Berger et al. (2021) show that transportation difficulties, a criminal record, caregiving responsibilities, and physical health limitations all result in a lower probability of employment. In light of this, it seems particularly cruel that failure to pay child support can result in loss of driver's license and imprisonment. Punitive measures that are meant to enforce child support can turn into barriers for paying for it (Cancian & Meyer, 2018; Nepomnyaschy et al., 2022), and forced engagement with the child support court system is associated with negative impacts on fathers' mental health and well-being (McLeod & Flynn, 2023). Moreover, the administration of child support functions as a bureaucracy where decrease of income (e.g., loss of employment) does not update child support payments immediately. Therefore, a father can be on the hook for payments based on the income amount from his previous job despite not having income for months at a time. The inability to meet his child support obligation can result in arrears (arrears also occur while men are imprisoned), and men then have to pay a comical amount in comparison to their non-existent or low-paying job (Pate, 2005). Currently, around 77% of non-resident parents are behind on child support payments (Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2020). It is worth noting, however, that many fathers convey a high level of desire to be directly involved in their children's lives, including through financial provision (Kane et al., 2015; Nepomnyashchy et al., 2022). The structural barriers preventing child support payments present as the principal factor in (un)-successfully meeting their financial obligations, pointing to an issue of ability, not willingness, to pay.

In Columbia, SC, many fathers entering child support court hearings are mandated to attend programs about fatherhood and responsible parenting. The leading organization supporting these groups in Columbia is the Midland Fatherhood Coalition, with a mission to "engage fathers in the positive support of their children and to enhance support for fatherhood throughout the midlands" (Midlands Fatherhood Coalition, n.d.-a). The organization offers educational classes, employment services, child support advice, legal assistance, mediation services, and transportation (Midlands Fatherhood Coalition, n.d.-b). MFC provides a community to discuss strategies for navigating the child support system, along with a supportive environment to process their challenges. The organization offers resources to transform traditional narratives about non-residential fathers who are labeled "deadbeat dads."

The idea of a "deadbeat dad" projects moral assumptions about non-residential fathers as being willfully absent from child-rearing activities, attempting to reinforce normative ideas of traditional nuclear family structures (Battle, 2018; Pate, 2005). Black fathers are often projected into these

narratives as a consequence of racialized depictions by government officials and popular media (Battle, 2018; Edin & Nelson, 2013). However, data indicates that these assumptions are unfounded. Research has shown that fathers who miss child support payments are not racially homogeneous and include a diversity of parents lacking adequate financial resources (Cancian & Meyer, 2004).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample Population: Treatment vs. Control

Columbia, SC		Control	Treatment
SAMPLE SIZE		130	100
AVG. AGE OF RESPONDENT (YEARS)		39	38
GENDER (%)	Male	100	100
	Female	--	--
CHILDREN IN HOUSEHOLDS (%)		69	64
AVG. NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN HH		1	1
AVG. HH SIZE		3	3
ETHNICITY (%)		99	100
RACE (%)	White	7	5
	African American	87	88
	Other/Mixed	6	7
	Single	17	19
MARITAL STATUS (%)	Married	27	25
	Partnered/ in-relationship	56	56
	English	100	100
PRIMARY LANGUAGE (IN %)	Spanish	--	--
	Other	--	--
	High School or less	61	58
EDUCATION (%)	Associate/Bachelor	19	20
	Other	20	22
	Mean	20,207	21,222
ANNUAL HH INCOME (IN%)	Median	20,599	20,489

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

Fathers in the treatment group for this study were on average 38 years old; those in the control group were 39. Most had at least one child they counted as part of their household—69% in control and 64% in treatment, and the average household size was three people across both groups. The overwhelming majority were non-Hispanic Black men (87–88%), and 7% of the control group were White, compared to 5% of the treatment group. Six percent of the control group indicated mixed racial or ethnic identity,

compared to 7% in treatment. The marital status of the groups was also equally balanced, with 17% of the treatment group reporting being single compared to 19% in control. Approximately one-quarter of both groups were married, and over half in each group (56%) were partnered or in a relationship. All participants spoke English as their primary language, and approximately 60% in each group reported their highest education as high school or less. About 20% of the sample held an Associate's or Bachelor's degree, and approximately 20% had a technical certificate or other type of degree. The median household income for both groups neared \$20,500.

THEORETICAL ANCHORS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

CLIMB provided a guaranteed income of \$500 per month for one year spanning August 2021 to September 2022. All of the research methods noted here were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Pennsylvania and comply with CGIR's Pre-Analysis Plan for randomized controlled trials receiving funding from the Mayors for a Guaranteed Income (Abt Associates, 2023). As such, this research rests on a parallel mixed-methods design with complete analysis occurring within each respective quantitative and qualitative strand before integration (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). This research rests on a theory of change which posits that the experience of income volatility and chronic scarcity mimics trauma and keeps individuals trapped in the present, unable to move forward (West et al., 2023). This experience of persistent material hardship impacts health, well-being, and undermines time and capacity for healthy relationships (Sayre, 2023; West & Castro, 2023).

IDEALIZED MASCULINITY AND FATHERHOOD

Since the CLIMB pilot focused on fathers, most of whom are non-custodial parents paying child support, we also draw on social welfare literature theorizing about the role gender plays in societal expectations of ideal masculinity and fatherhood (Abramovitz, 2017; Pate, 2005). More specifically, an idealized version of work ethic and family ethic are written into social policy, assigning particular tasks to fathers and mothers and penalizing them if they stray from them (Abramovitz, 2017). Prominent theories on fatherhood primarily focus on the role of financial provision and economic performance, regardless of structural or employment conditions, while the mother cares for their children, other family members, and the home. Within this family constellation, the father is understood as an individualized worker-citizen who provides for, and is not expected to be part of, child-rearing activities (Alesina et al., 2013; Engels, 1902; Korteweg, 2003). The father presented in these theories follows traditional gender roles and is usually a married, middle-class, heterosexual, White man (Inhorn et al., 2014). These normative projections of the father have their foundations in plow-based agrarian societies wherein the man farmed and sold the crops, while the woman tended to domestic responsibilities (Alesina et al., 2013). The pressure to perform as the sole breadwinner still resonates today, with fathers feeling immense pressure to provide financially (Parker and Stepler, 2017; Pate, 2005). The work environment is not tailored to fathers who desire to be an active and engaged parent. If fathers take advantage of family-friendly work policies, like flex schedules or family leave, managers view them negatively (Gatrell et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the social safety net assumes the presence of a woman performing unpaid care work to raise children and manage the household (Abramovitz, 2017). As breadwinners, some men see a fatherhood earnings bonus (compared with a motherhood earnings penalty), although the

fatherhood bonus does privilege White males above males who identify as non-White (Hodges and Budig, 2010; Kmec, 2011).

While definitions of what it means to be a man have evolved over time, they have not done so uniformly for men of color and those who experience poverty. Black men represent a group of men often characterized in a different light than other fathers and judged by a nearly impossible standard.¹ As far back as the 17th century, Black men who were slaves were portrayed as absent and neglectful while ignoring the key role they played in raising their children and participating in family life (Hilde, 2020). Unfortunately, that characterization has not changed much today. Dorothy Roberts (1998) aptly wrote that Black men represent the symbol of fatherlessness today. The trope of the “deadbeat dad,” one who abdicates their moral and financial responsibility, is often applied to Black fathers (Hamer, 2001; Pate, 2005). In fact, the term acts as a dog whistle to primarily refer to Black fathers without explicitly saying so. Rather than acting as harmless discourse, racial tropes and metaphors like the deadbeat dad (similar to the welfare queen) play a role in shaping poverty, law, and welfare access (Cammett, 2014).

The deadbeat dad acts as one of the villains of welfare programs, a villain who does not pay child support. In his infamous report, Daniel Moynihan (1965) wrote that deadbeat Black dads contributed to poverty in the Black community. The negative portrayal of Black, largely low-income fathers has

¹ For other non-normative fathers (i.e., those who are not able bodied, heterosexual, White, middle-income or higher), fatherhood can appear differently. These men are stereotyped as less competent (see Strier & Perez-Vaisvidovsky, 2021). Marginalized identities may include gay fathers, undocumented fathers, working-poor fathers, and Black or Hispanic fathers.



been used as rationale for policies either promoting marriage or trying to force non-resident fathers to be involved in their children's lives (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Pate, 2005). Research challenges this un-involvement, showing that many men remain very involved in the lives of their children, whether they live with them or not. However, this reality often does not matter for policy reform. President Bill Clinton's 1996 push to "end welfare as we know it" was partially meant to reform and punish the deadbeat dad (Pate, 2005). The reform allowed states to adopt more stringent policies to establish paternity and enforce child support orders by the court, which could result in jail time if unpaid (Cancian & Meyer, 2004; Pate, 2005). However, men on minimum wage could not often afford the huge payments. Moreover, instead of money going directly to the children, hefty administrative costs meant that portions of the money were subsumed by bureaucracy (Garfinkel et al., 1998). Furthermore, informal support (i.e., money directly to mothers, buying things for children, emotional and social support) was not recognized by the state. Studies show that many men feel their engagement in the child support system removes agency and negatively impacts their ability to positively parent their child (Pate, 2005). Moreover, responsible fatherhood policies may reinscribe patriarchy by reifying men as the breadwinner and making women more reliant on them. The mass incarceration of Black men also impacts fatherhood. 69% of incarcerated men are fathers, and most desire to be involved with their children during and after imprisonment. However, they cannot make much money in prison, and they cannot spend much time with their children. This lack of parenting resources greatly inhibits the ability to parent as they want. Rather than through their choice, the structural obstacles laid out inhibit many Black and low-income fathers. This raises the question of what GI can accomplish. To that end, the primary research questions of this study were:

- » How does GI affect participants' quality of life?
- » What is the relationship between GI and participants' subjective sense of self?
- » How does GI affect participants' income, and through what mechanisms?
- » What can participants teach us about the administration of safety net programs?

Methodology

Quantitative Methods

Study design and participant selection: After completing the Baseline quantitative survey, 100 respondents who met eligibility criteria of living in the 29203 or 29223 zip codes and being a current or former client of the MFC were randomized using simple random assignment into the treatment condition. An additional 130 were randomized into the control condition whereby they participated in compensated research activities but did not receive the GI.

Quantitative data were collected at Baseline prior to randomization (January through April 2021), 6 months after disbursement (February 2022), 12 months after disbursement (August 2022) marking the end of the GI payments, and 6 months after the program was complete (February 2023). We anticipated a 20% attrition rate across groups, thus a conservative approach was adopted preemptively to ensure a minimal detectable effect of 0.30. With a two-tailed hypothesis, we aimed for a statistical power of 0.80 with a significance level of 0.05. Overall attrition was 51% at 6 months, 43% at 12 months, and 52% at 18 months.

Data analysis: A standardized framework was employed to detect and manage outliers, ensuring that extreme values did not unduly influence the results. Outliers were addressed through the winsorization method. The Multiple Imputation by Chained Equations (MICE) (Azur et al., 2011) iterative imputer was systematically employed to handle missing data across the dataset. MICE is adept at handling complex data structures and patterns, offering more accurate imputations in scenarios with significant missing data. MICE operates through a series of iterations, with each iteration employing a unique random seed to ensure a diverse range of imputation results, thereby bolstering the robustness of the imputed datasets. The Imputation was conducted over specified outcome variables and selected demographics. By considering both treatment and control groups separately, the imputation ensured that the unique characteristics of each group were preserved. After the imputation process, several measures were taken to validate the accuracy and reliability of the imputed data, which included evaluating the distribution analysis comparing the distribution of the original observed data to the imputed data to ensure consistency. Plausibility checks to ensure that all imputed values fell within a valid range for each respective variable were also employed. Additionally, convergence diagnostics were closely monitored to ensure stability of imputed values. Finally, sensitivity analyses and model fits were conducted as supplementary validation measures. As a result of these rigorous checks, a set of imputed datasets was generated, each offering a comprehensive set of plausible values for missing data points. These datasets then formed the foundation for subsequent analyses in the study.

Following imputation, a comprehensive analytical approach was employed to assess the impact of the GI treatment intervention across multiple validated measures. The analysis involved a regression-adjusted means analysis, allowing for a robust examination of the data collected at several time points. Regression-adjusted means analysis for each measure provided a direct mean difference in outcomes, adjusting for potential confounding variables and enabling a straightforward comparison

between the treatment and control groups at each time interval: Baseline, 6 months, 12 months, and 18-month follow-up.

Qualitative Methods

In the middle of the disbursement range, 30 participants (20 treatment, 10 control) were recruited to participate in one-on-one semi-structured interviews that were compensated with a \$40 gift card, recorded on a DVR, and professionally transcribed verbatim. Of the 30 interviews offered, three control and three treatment members canceled, yielding a final sample of 17 treatment group members and 7 control.² Interviews occurred either in participant's homes or a community location of their choosing. Five participants interviewed over Zoom to avoid COVID exposure. All Zoom interviews followed the same interview protocol and methodology as in-person interviews. Theoretically driven memo-writing occurred all throughout the data-collection process and served as the first step in recursive, thematic mapping which was carried out through the entire analysis phase. At key points in analysis the co-PIs guided the research team in developing "thick description" analytic memos to blend semantic and latent themes across the data set (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 538).³

The codebook and interview protocol were anchored in the literature on scarcity and idealized fatherhood noted prior. De-identification and coding was completed in Dedoose by a 6-member graduate-level research assistant team trained by the co-PIs. Analysis consisted of an approach blending Braun and Clark's (2012) thematic analysis with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) to appropriately capture semantic and latent levels of analysis simultaneously. Thematic analysis employed process coding for strategies, decision-making, goals, finances, and interactions with the court system (Saldana, 2010). Grounded theory analysis leveraged focus and theoretical coding on ideology, structural oppression, masculinity and idealized fatherhood to situate these fathers' experiences within larger societal discourse.

2 Control group narrative data was primarily used in this report for understanding the context of Columbia and the experiences of Black fathers in this location. Full analysis of their narrative data is part of a forthcoming cross-site analysis across GI pilots in the US.

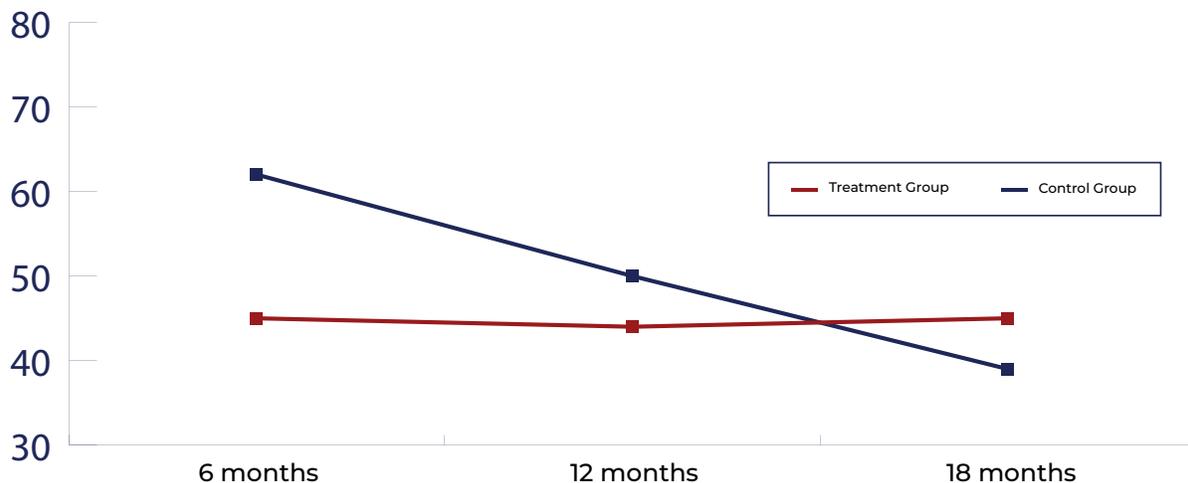
3 A detailed protocol of these steps can be located in the Pre-Analysis Plan (Abt Associates, 2023).

Findings

1. Quality of Life

Financial well-being: Fathers in both groups of the study were surviving on meager incomes. At Baseline, fathers in the treatment group reported their average household income at \$21,222 compared to \$20,207 reported by those in the control group. At the one-year mark, recipients of the GI reported approximately \$1,000 less in annual income compared to the control group, though the trend reversed 6 months after the payments ceased. Strikingly, these fathers were living on less than half of the Area Median Income for Columbia. Receipt of the GI calmed income volatility, or the month-over-month change in income. For recipient fathers, income volatility was 45%, compared to 62% in the control group. This trend persisted through the end of the program, with the treatment group reporting 44% income volatility compared to 50% in control. Six months after the stoppage of payments, volatility remained constant at 45% in the treatment group, but dropped substantially for the control group to 39%.

Figure 1. Income Volatility for Treatment and Control (in %)



Although the GI blunted income volatility's impact, the fathers also reported long-held habits for weathering their fluctuating incomes by attempting to plan ahead and budget to the best of their ability despite their inability to predict the precise amount of their income. These habits carried them through, but left little to no bandwidth for unexpected expenses. The GI functioned, in part, to fill in these gaps. In Thomas' words:

It's just been, been an extra help, I would more so say, um, making sure like, like finances like gas... and gas can be super expensive. So having that extra, having that extra, um, extra income was a blessing for us because we were able to make sure the food was in the house and gas and stuff. ... We've got to have lights, we gotta have water, um, we gotta have gas and everything because we, we have a gas stove and so and so and we've gotta have food and gotta have, got to have actual gasoline for cars. So those are just a priority thing. So, ah, just making sure those priorities will be taken care of... We, we actually purchased a deep freezer so that we can make sure we have that extra, extra room. We definitely buy food in bulk, um, um, clo— you know, making sure like clothes detergent, make sure we have enough of that because there's six of us, so we have to make sure that all those clothes are washed. Then just what we try to make sure, what we try, what we try to do is we gas, because the cars are a half tank to fill it up, at that, once we, once we hit that mark because tha—that is, it doesn't seem like it's cheaper, but it's actually cheaper.

Fathers like Thomas disrupt pejorative assumptions that men of color are not engaged in the home life of their families and reflect an active battle with meager finances to support their children. Despite tough financial circumstances, fathers were committed to helping their children and trying to make ends meet against steep odds. When money did not directly go to their children, fathers often cited that the money paid to maintain their basic needs like phones, rent, electricity, and groceries. Some said they would use the GI to start saving for a house, while others started, or planned to start, their own business ventures. Larry leveraged his first GI payment to jumpstart his small business and “went to the department store, got a shop vac, different things. Just stuff related to car detailing.” Meanwhile, Kingston purchased supplies to launch his online communications business:

I went to school for mass communications. I started looking on [two popular retail websites] so I started picking up little pieces of equipment here and there. This program—with this program, I could afford to go buy a \$30 mic.

The purchase made with GI assistance helped the fathers maintain their livelihoods and afforded an ability to explore alternative opportunities.

The ongoing struggle to cover basic needs may have precluded any ability for upward economic mobility. A key indicator of financial well-being, the ability to cover a \$400 emergency using cash or cash equivalent was 7 percentage points higher for recipients compared to control as the GI payments ended, but then changed to 3 percentage points lower than the control group 6 months after the program concluded. Similarly, there was little change in the amount of savings that participants reported. At Baseline, 75% of treatment and 78% of control reported less than \$200 in their savings account. One year later, 67% of the treatment group and 70% of the control group had less than \$200 in savings, indicating only a marginal and not statistically significant improvement among the treatment group. Six months after the pilot ended, both groups nearly returned to their Baseline levels of savings.

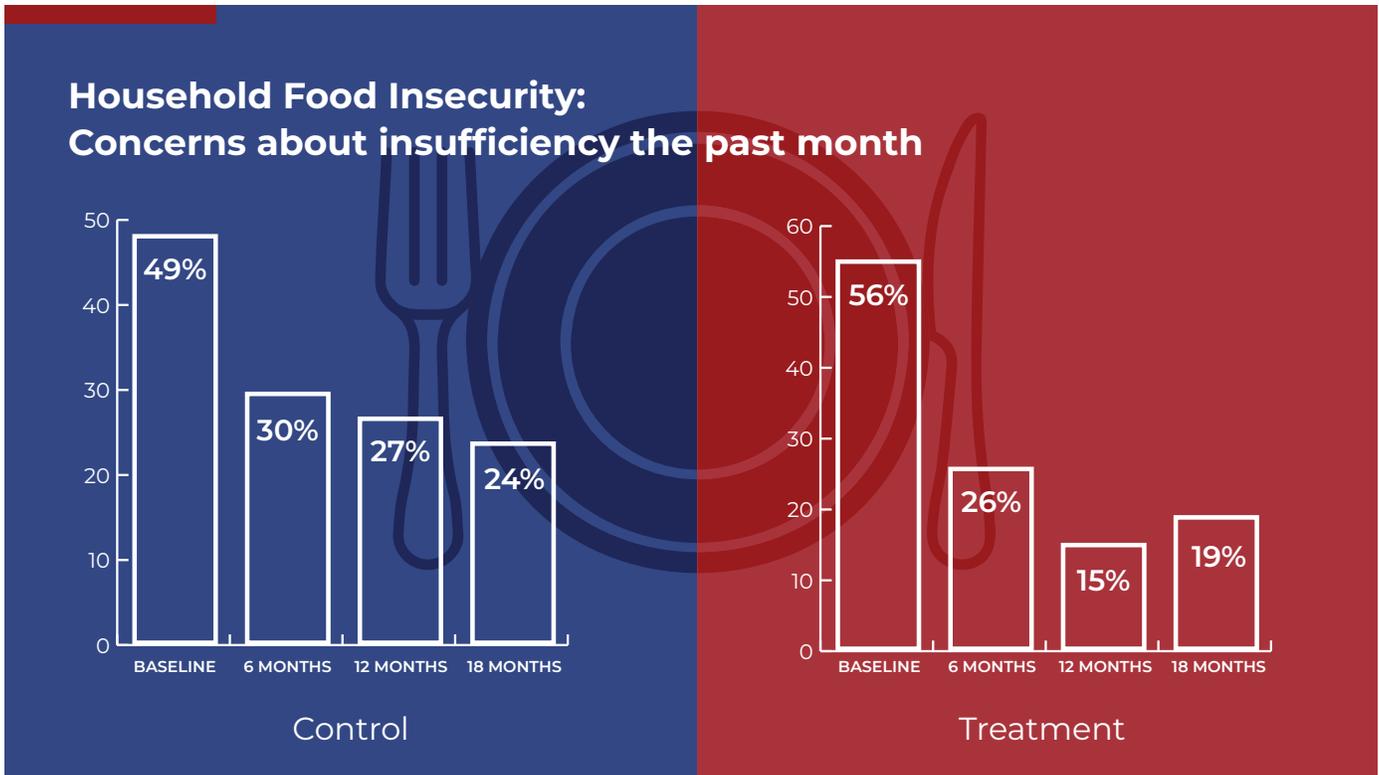
The impact of GI on financial well-being was not evident in the shifts in score distributions observed

between the treatment and control groups from Baseline to the conclusion of the study. At Baseline, the average financial well-being score for the treatment group (M=42.55) and the control group (M=43.01) was positioned within Medium Low (38–49) categories of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's (2015) Financial Well-Being Scale. Individuals in these categories often lack savings, maintaining less than \$250 in liquid savings, lack enough consistent liquidity to remain within a household budget, and have histories of interactions with debt collectors or of having credit applications rejected. These scores trended in parallel for both groups throughout the study, indicating no statistically detectable effect of GI receipt on the Financial Well-Being Scale.

Housing security and quality: In 2020, 30% of households in Columbia faced housing cost burden, where the monthly rent was in excess of 30% of their monthly income (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2023). Reflecting the extremely low incomes of the sample, 42.8% of the control group were housing-cost burdened at Baseline compared to 52.25% of treatment. Six months after the GI payments ceased, the trend reversed, where 51.19% of control group members were housing-cost burdened compared to 43.31% of the GI recipients. This effect was statistically significant, with a mean difference of 9.35 ($p=.02$). As incomes did not markedly increase for the treatment group to offset housing costs, it may be that recipients were able to secure more affordable housing. Before receiving GI payments, 54% of the treatment group were renters compared to 53% of control. One-quarter of treatment group fathers lived with friends or family compared to 22% of control, and 12% of recipients were homeowners compared to 16% of control. Six months after the intervention, the only notable shifts in housing status between groups appeared in homeownership, with the control group reporting a 10 percentage point increase compared to a 6 percentage point increase for the treatment group. After CLIMB ended, 51% of the control group and 57% of treatment indicated their current housing was about the same quality as their prior housing. Thirty-five percent of treatment group members noted their current housing was better than prior housing arrangements compared to 39% of control.

Food security: Consistently, receipt of the GI impacted access to adequate and chosen foods for fathers. From Baseline to 6 months after the pilot, the proportion of control group participants that worried about food declined 25 percentage points, from 49% to 24%. The proportion of treatment group fathers with reported worry about food declined 37 percentage points, from 56% at baseline to 19% at endline. Similar trends are evident in the treatment group's greater ability to eat a sufficient amount of choice foods as compared to control.

Physical and mental health: Many of the fathers had experienced recurrent hardships throughout their lives, ranging from persistent issues with finances to transportation, physical health, and loss of close relatives or social support. While the fathers developed robust coping and behavioral strategies for managing these challenges, many expressed issues related to their mental health conditions. The fathers outwardly discussed how they struggled with anxiety and depression, while others alluded to mental health issues through their tone and life circumstances. For example, when Jacob was asked about his mental health, he named his issues, "I mean, you know, PTSD, bipolar 1, depression, anxiety, that doesn't go anywhere." Mike, on the other hand, was less explicit about how his life's experiences impacted his mental health. On separate occasions, Mike was stabbed and shot, with the latter leaving him physically disabled. Additionally, one of Mike's children was adopted without his knowledge while he was serving time for drug possession, with his other child being incarcerated for



murder. Mike summed up his lived experience, simply stating, “I’ve been hit with disappointments my whole life.” Like Mike, many of the fathers avoided explicitly acknowledging the psychological toll traumatic events had on their mental health, but their impact was manifest throughout their interviews. Many of the father’s mental health issues were exacerbated or resulted from a lack of social support and feelings of loneliness or being left out. This was especially apparent among fathers who were separated from their children’s mothers, and for those living by themselves, the risk of mental health problems was more pronounced. Moreover, most of the fathers described the negative psychological impact of a society that expected them to be their family’s sole breadwinner while they were structurally prevented from avenues to strong employment and affordable housing. In other words, they were being judged by a standard that was nearly impossible to fulfill due to circumstances well outside of their control. Living up to this role often meant fathers worked extra hours or took on a second job, further isolating them from their families and friends. As James Earl said, men feel the crushing pressure to “carry the weight of the household.”

Both the treatment and control participants reported heightened stress levels, as measured by the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983), above the threshold score of 6. At Baseline, the treatment group fathers (M=7.09) reported higher and statistically significant stress levels than the control group (M=6.52), with an average difference of .57. While the effect of GI on stress dissipated in months 6 and 12, the significant difference returned to Baseline observations 6 months after the program concluded. Again, treatment group fathers (M=6.63) reported higher stress levels than those in the control group (M=6.07).

This indicator of stress, however, did not appear to manifest in clinically significant psychological

distress. At the 6-month observation, treatment group fathers (M=18.56) had higher scores on the Kessler-10 instrument (Kessler et al., 2003) compared to control group fathers (M=17.15). Yet, all participants' average scores on the Kessler-10 hovered around 18, below the cutoff of 20, indicating they were likely to be mentally well.

Some fathers did not discuss how they maintain their mental health or where they would go for mental health treatment, while others recognized the need for therapy and the accessibility challenges. Q “attended therapy for a little while. I liked it, too. But, like I said, I couldn’t afford it. So that’s why I stopped going.” A structural barrier prevented Q from continuing therapy or starting again. Others said they processed their mental health concerns with close family members, while some who were in the military accessed mental health services through Veterans Affairs.

Stress Levels: Treatment vs. Control

Throughout the study period, the treatment group reported higher stress levels than the control group. However, six months post intervention, the stress levels for the treatment group decreased whereas the stress levels for the control group remained relatively stable.

Kessler Psychological Distress (K10) Levels

- < 20 Likely to be well
- 20-24 Likely to have a mild mental disorder
- 25-29 Likely to have moderate mental disorder
- 30+ Likely to have a severe mental disorder



For many, stressors associated with financial precarity can result in worse health outcomes. To test health impacts of GI receipt, the Short Form Health Survey (SF-36) was used (*36-Item Short Form Survey*, n.d.). Men in the study, in both treatment (M=75.10) and control (M=77.48) conditions had higher than average general health scores at Baseline, though their scores were significantly different. The average score of general health in the Medical Outcomes Study, used to develop the SF-36, was 56.99 (SD=21.1), indicating that participants in CLIMB were healthier than the general population (Stewart et al., 1992). Average general health scores were not significantly different across the other observation periods. Similarly, there were no significant differences by group related to role limitations related to physical health other than at the Baseline observation. Physical functioning of the control group (M=79.01) was significantly higher than treatment (M=71.75) at Baseline. This significant trend was also observed at the one-year observation, with the average treatment group score of 70.00 compared to control at 75.95. Although substantive changes in health were not found in this study, fathers did report that the GI calmed some anxiety, knowing they had the cash, if needed, for basic needs and small medical bills. In James’ words:

I know I can pay for a place to stay. I know I can have something to eat, I know that I can go to the doctor to get my tooth pulled. Those are the things that people look over, you know, so just having that extra added income is—is a major thing.

Fatherhood and child-wellbeing: Most of the fathers expressed a deep devotion to their child(ren)'s well-being. Many gave short, unemotional responses in the interviews, until they were asked what it meant to be a father, at which point the men lit up and changed their demeanor, often providing page-length descriptions about their relationships with their child(ren) and their dreams for the future. For example, when James (III) spoke about being a father, it was clear to the interviewer that “he took so much pride in being a father through hearing his voice and seeing his eyes light up when talking about his kids.” Many men, when asked about what fatherhood means to them, responded with “it’s everything.” Jacob elaborated, “it’s everything, but also the hardest thing,” perhaps referring not only to the act of parenting, but also to the circumstances that make it difficult to parent as he wished.

Children gave meaning to the fathers' existence, providing an identity the fathers emphatically embraced. Many of the fathers had their children at young and formative ages, making fatherhood a defining feature of how they saw themselves. Arnold said he had his first child when he was (in his own words) a “14-year-old delinquent,” and it “kind of made me grow up then. And... every child after that I felt like I, you know,... got better choices I made.” Adding to their identity, the fathers often tied their own feelings of success to their child(ren)'s achievements. James said,

to be a father means—so I'll say it like this, the way that I see my kids, um-hmm, I see them as a reflection of me. Um-hmm, and I see them as, uh-hmm, an extension of me as well. Um-hmm, you know, my goal and my hopes and my dreams for my kids is for them to be, you know, healthy, prosperous, knowledgeable people, good people, um-hmm, good hearted people and um-hmm, be able to stand on their own and you know, see their—their dreams forward and, and have the confidence in them that they can handle and do their dreams.

The devotion the fathers showed was present in many of their actions. James watched YouTube videos to learn the Montessori style of teaching so he could be involved in his children's education. Additionally, in another poignant example of a sacrifice, John Doe quit his job as a long-haul driver, bought a house, and hired a lawyer to recover custody of his daughter, who was taken into foster care while in her mother's care when John Doe was on the road. At the time of the interview, he still had not financially recovered, although he was awarded custody of his daughter.

All the men in the study took their responsibility as fathers seriously, and providing financially was often at the forefront of their responsibilities. Many men, especially those who lived with their spouse/partner, reflected traditional gender norms, where the default state for men is to provide financially and for women is to care for the child(ren). In fact, Jacob, when asked about childcare, stated his “main childcare responsibility ... [is to] make sure that we have food in the house.” Additionally, Kevin said that his wife does “a lot more [with] the kids ... I bring in most of the money. So, I pay the most. I pay the rent, the bigger bills.” Kevin referred to the money he brought in as “his money” and not “their money.” In an ideal world, fathers aspired to be primary breadwinners, while abdicating the role of caregiving to children's mothers. To live up to this ideal, some of the men worked over 8-hour days for wages they believed to be inadequate, recognizing and accepting their exploitation when alternative employment options did not exist. However, many men did not operate in their ideal situations. Income constraints, relationship difficulties, and systemic barriers prevented the fulfilling of their natural order of things.

Although financial provision was the primary fatherly task to these men, other responsibilities were also heavily cited. To James (III), a father is there “to protect and provide for your family ... so it weighs really heavy.” Kingston said “I feel like being a father, I’m supposed to protect them and guide them and show them the right ways.” The act of protecting maintains a key place for the fathers. Fatherhood also meant imparting values like responsibility. To many, fathers are meant to give direction and show children right from wrong. To James Earl, a father is,

somebody that’s able to give strong direction, being able to be the bad guy, but understanding their children are going to grow ... It’s not a sexist thing, but I have to say it this way, as a man of my household, I carry the weight of everything in my household because when it all comes back down to, it’s coming to me anyway.

James Earl put a heavy burden on himself. He needed to teach his children responsibility because ultimately, the way he saw it, the buck stopped with him, as the leader in the family. Similar ideas about gender and masculinity ran through many of the fathers’ thoughts. Many said that the role of women was to love the children, whereas men taught them responsibility. In an extended quote, Michael said that:

A man’s understanding is a little bit more higher than a woman because of the level of responsibility he has to take on. So, when you look at, you know, for your typical, I’m just say a husband and wife. The... they sit down, they talk about the situation and they say, hey, this is a solution. But then she go out and, you know, being a woman, she say, well I’m gonna just do it like this. And then, it, it’s like, makes a mess and then... who has to come up and do that clean that work? The husband. Even with kids, you know, “Dad told me not to do such and such, and I did it, so now who have the—bad.” So because he carries a higher, he covers a more wide range of stewardship, he has a higher responsibility.

Later, Michael said that a “father makes decisions based on overall. Mom sometimes make decisions based on feelings; can’t do that with kids.” The view that men are more rational and adept at imparting morals to children, seen in a few of the other interviews, rather than a unique feature of this sample, reflects broader Southern ideologies, which hold more conservative views on women’s roles in the family and society (Campbell & Marsden, 2012; Carter & Borch, 2005; Rice & Coates, 1995).

As previously stated, for these fathers, part of being a man is the ability to provide (financially and morally) for their children, and when unable to do so, men find it hard to ask for help. Even when in danger of going completely broke, Thomas did not “ask for extra help.” Likewise, Brian would not accept help when he had money problems but “really ran from everybody.” While asking for help feels stigmatizing, some men realized its necessity. Kevin stated that his father did not ask for help, and he did not ask for help, but for his children, “they got to ask for help.” In that, there seems to be a change between how the fathers were raised, and how they want to raise their children.

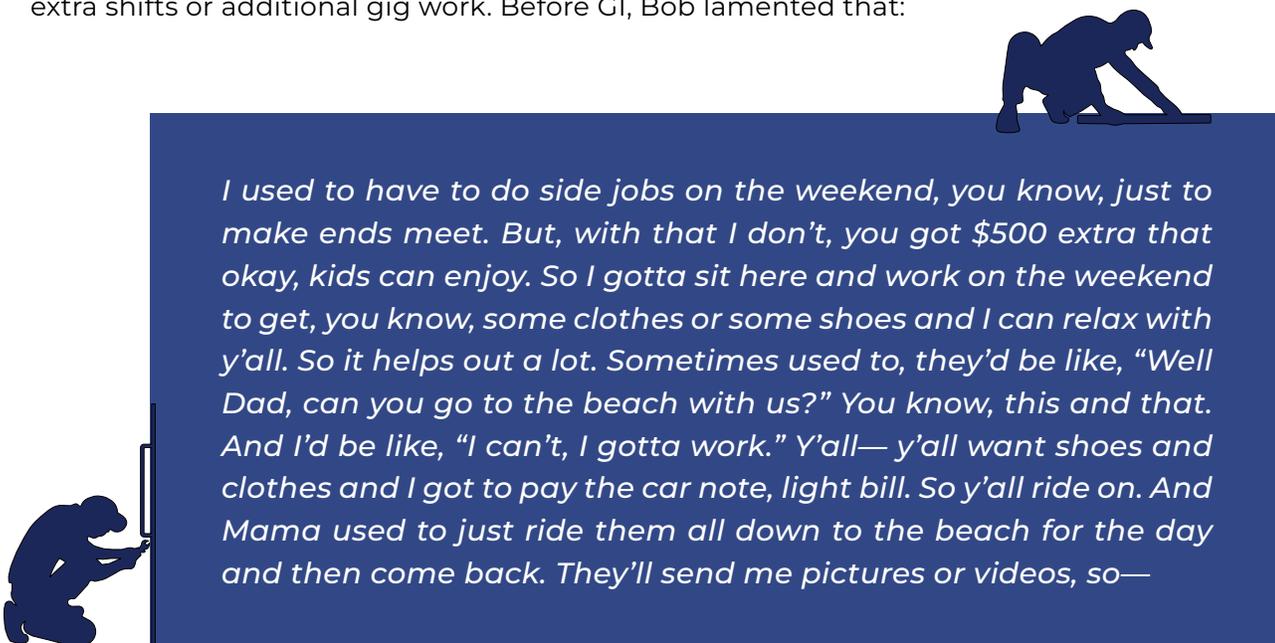
This resistance to tradition was seen in other ways during the interviews. Many single fathers had a strong desire to be involved in caregiving, and they desired a closer relationship than purely financial.

Jeffrey fought for visitation rights with his children and was eventually able to see them for eight hours a week. Even this limited amount of time “is killing [him].”

The Confusion, Hubub, and Order Scale (CHAOS; Matheny et al., 1995) was used to test the effects of GI on the home environment. However, aside from Baseline, prior to the intervention, no significant effects were detected. Given that the preponderance of the sample are non-custodial fathers, this finding is not unexpected.

GI and fatherhood: Fathers talked about how the GI payments directly impacted the relationship they had with their children, allowing them to show up in their children’s lives in meaningful ways that were not possible prior to the intervention. The men talked about how GI payments allowed them to connect with their children through meaning-making activities, something that they ordinarily could not provide. For example, Thomas used his first GI payment to buy his son a new basketball video game for them to enjoy together, and Q provided money to be used in Roblox and Fortnite video games, while also buying his older son two expensive prom tickets, costing \$85 each.

Before GI, being unable to provide for their children’s desires was hard on many, and fathers connected the inability to purchase anything extra, like participation in extracurricular activities or special events like prom, as keeping their children from full participation in normative rites of growing up. Arnold surmised this dynamic meant that before GI, his children “maybe considered [him] a grumpy dad” because he could not afford to provide the way he saw fit. After receiving the GI, his stress level decreased because he could say yes to more items or activities his children asked for. Some fathers discussed how, even in places where money does not go directly towards children, they used the GI payments to spend quality time with their children. This often took the shape of not having to pick up extra shifts or additional gig work. Before GI, Bob lamented that:



Bob felt a sense of loss in missing fun family outings, which can contribute to a sense of isolation. GI helped him get time back with his children, while still ensuring their needs were met. Many of the

fathers discussed that they used the money on and for their children only. Bob explicitly said, “it’s really their money, it’s not the parents’ money or the father’s money, it’s the kids’ money.” While other fathers did not make the same grandiose statement as Bob, it was clear that many viewed the GI as a way to provide for their children, in both little and big ways. For example, GI payments helped Larry put money towards his 21-year-old son’s first vehicle, Mike sent money to his 22-year-old son in jail, James (III) used the money to visit his children in Washington, DC, and Arnold traveled to watch his children play AAU basketball.

2. GI and Sense of Self

Social isolation: The importance that social interactions (or lack thereof) held in recipients’ lives resonated throughout the interviews. On the one hand, men had fulfilling relationships with their children, partners, families, and communities, adding weight to how GI payments helped men spend more time with loved ones. On the other hand, a great many of the men were lonely and isolated, which exacerbated, or even seemed to cause, their mental health problems.

Feelings of loss and grief were evident in fathers’ narratives and contributed to a sense of social isolation. The fathers discussed how they experienced loss of a loved one, loss of a romantic relationship, loss of living with their child, and the loss of dignity when they failed to meet societal expectations even though the deck was stacked against them. Brian poignantly explained how an apartment fire that destroyed his military awards, family pictures, and computer files, coupled with his divorce and the death of his brother, impacted both his mental state and his feelings of social isolation:

Brian: Like, just not caring about nothing. Yeah. And—and I let it take me over but I took it back for myself. But I let it get me at first though. The monster was eating, the monster was eating there first. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. But then you—you like— Did you find help? Like, did you have people to kind of help you out of that situation?

Brian: No, because I really ran from everybody. Nobody— nobody— nobody knew that. No... I didn’t care.

Brian dealt with an enormous amount of loss, and in some very powerful words, described how it impacted his mental health. His phrase “the monster was eating” conveyed a forlorn sense of hopelessness. He gave in to sadness and depression, running away from any help. Loss led to increased social isolation and an ambivalent attitude about his own life. Likewise for other men, loss in the form of the death of a loved one or ending of a relationship (or both) led to social isolation. John Doe said, “Well, the family member that I had, you know, he, he passed... So it’s just me, here kind of on my own [with no support system].”

For many fathers, they felt the most important relationship in their life was with their children. They stressed the need for presence in their children's lives, and when they could not be the father they wanted to be, social isolation was further exacerbated. James (II) expressed how when his children's mother passed, they chose not to live with him, and he maintained little contact with them. Relationships with children were often mediated by relationships with the children's mothers, in almost all cases the ex-partner of the father. Many had had tough break-ups and strained relationships, and the fathers expressed intense bitterness towards the mothers, who, in the fathers' view, kept the children away from them in retaliation. This strain, though presenting as interpersonal, is structurally enhanced by the state's mandate that a mother must pursue child support payments in court to receive social welfare assistance, such as TANF. Despite this state mandate, many fathers interpreted the legal pursuit of child support payments as a direct attack by the mothers.

For non-residential parents, technology formed a vital way to keep in touch. In a particularly touching example, Larry called his 10-year-old daughter every morning at 6 am during his work break. For the many men who used GI payments to keep up on their cellphone bills, this indirectly helped with their feelings of social isolation because they could afford to communicate with their children, even when not in the same location.

The Life Attitudes Scale (LAS) is a measure used to capture tragic optimism, or "a distinct type of optimism that could generate hopeless hope even in dire situations according to existential positive psychology" (Leung et al., 2021). At Baseline, the treatment group (M=14.30) reported significantly lower scores in the domains called Affirmation of Meaning and Value of Life, which indicated a lower aptitude to see an inherent meaning or purpose in life than those in the control group (M=14.71). The lower scores remained constant, yet not statistically significant as men received the GI. Six months after, the differences were again statistically significant. Acceptance, a subscale of the LAS which measures one's acceptance of life's somewhat gloomy inevitabilities, was significantly higher for treatment (M=14.21) compared to control (M=13.95) one year into receiving payments. Similar significant outcomes were apparent in the Courage subscale, which measures one's willingness to deal with obstacles in order to pursue goals. Here, the treatment group's score was also slightly higher (M=12.69) at the 6-month observation when compared to control (M=12.36). The subscale Faith measures one's trust in God or a higher power given doubtful circumstances, and was only significantly different among groups at Baseline. Self-transcendence, or the measure of an ability to selflessly rise above one's situation and make a change in the world, was consistently and significantly higher for control rather than treatment at Baseline, 6 months, and 18 months.

The Adult Hope Scale was used to measure sense of agency, ability to set goals, and to imagine and plan pathways to meet those goals (Snyder et al., 1991). There were no significant differences between groups across the observation period. Whereas the control group's scores remained fairly flat at approximately 23 points on the Agency subscale, CLIMB recipients demonstrated significantly higher agency that was statistically significant 6 months after the program ended. Additionally, scores for the subscale of Pathway were significantly higher for treatment group (M=24.56) members compared to control (M=24.33) at the 6-month mark.

Social network: The fathers' social networks typically consisted of their children, parents, relatives, and ex-partners. Additionally, the MFC acted as an important social outlet and support system for many of

the men. They cited the importance of social support from the MFC, along with the mentorship and sociality that they got from it. Q said:

I used to have fun sitting in, in my meetings. You know, it was during the COVID era, but we had meetings on our phone. But, you know, like, it was dope hearing other people who's going, who's older than you, from different ages, younger than you, who's going through the same things you going through and then hearing how they deal with it and comparing it to how you deal with it. You know what I'm saying? You can, because I'm never too good to learn.

For Brian, the support of the MFC and the VA kept him out of jail: "I never went [to jail] ... because I had like the Fatherhood Coalition or VA people coming like, no, but if I was a regular civilian... I would have been locked up." Military institutions were also cited as important pieces of men's social networks. James (II) referenced military service as the best time in his life, presumably because of the social aspect involved.

It was also a stroke of luck that the MFC acted as an important social outlet for the fathers, given that many would not have chosen to attend meetings on their own. They were mandated to participate as part of their child support requirements. The strings that come with child support payments, a source of stress for many of the fathers, resulted in positive social outcomes. Due in part to their membership in the MFC, the men felt a profound sense of community with other fathers in similar situations. In the interviews, some of the fathers frequently used the pronoun "we," "ours," or "us" when describing circumstances that pertain to fathers, which allowed the men to universalize their experience, creating a network of solidarity. For example, Q said:

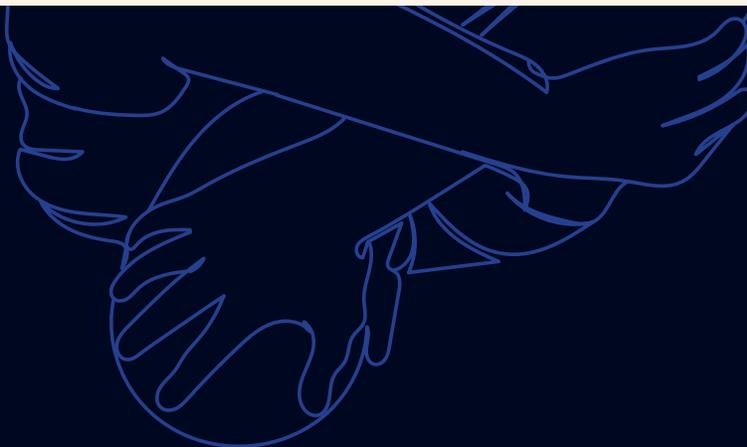
If we lose our job, then we just, that's it for us, you know, we can't, we can't go, it's hard for us to go to housing and get a housing voucher. It's hard for us to go down there and get food stamps.

While these examples illuminate places where men themselves felt supported, the fathers also made clear how important supporting others was to them. GI payments allowed men to show up in the lives of others, not only their children. For example, Robert gave \$600 to a friend to help her get out of jail, which led to an improved sense of self through the act of giving and, in turn, feeling trusted.



Case Study of Social Isolation

James (III), a man in his early 40s with four children under the age of 18, lives in Columbia, while his children live a 7-hour drive away. While James's parents also live in Columbia, he does not have many friends, and when not working at his full-time job or his daily side gig of Uber, he was alone. Before GI payments, James saw his children rather infrequently, only sporadically able to make the trip to visit them. He saw them "probably every other month as it's hard now." After GI, while still less than he would like, he was able to take more trips to see his children. Still, he clearly missed them, and he further lamented that he gets "to the point where I'm like, I need a hug, so I'm gonna go, then I'll go to take a 3-day trip or something down there." He made use of technology to voice and video call his children, something GI helped provide. Moreover, GI allowed him to provide tangible items for his children, which increased his sense of self while decreasing feelings of social isolation. He bought his son two prom tickets, gave him money for video games, and was able to offer greater support to two of his children who are deaf. The GI money also gave him more freedom to dream about the future, and he planned a permanent move to be closer to his children. GI helped James both with immediate feelings of social isolation, and will hopefully contribute to future feelings of connectedness.



3. Employment and Pathways to Earning

Obstacles to employment: Compared to the control group, fathers in the treatment group were significantly more likely to be employed as the payments were ending and 6 months after the program ended. Notably, full-time employment declined 14 percentage points in the control group across all observations, yet the treatment group largely maintained traction in the full-time workforce—beginning with 41% reporting full-time employment and ending with 40%. Part-time and seasonal work shifted in the control group from 11% to 27%, and was more consistent in treatment—beginning at 15% and ending at 17%.

Table 2. Trends in Employment: Treatment vs. Control

Employment Categories	Baseline		6 months		12 months		18 months	
	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment	Control	Treatment
Employed FT	37	41	25	35	24	36	23	40
Employed PT or seasonal	11	15	19	15	24	20	27	17
Stay-at-home parent or caregiver	11	7	24	14	17	8	19	13
Business owner/self-employed	10	8	11	11	10	14	19	13
Gig worker	2	3	11	7	13	6	1	4
Retired/disabled	7	8	5	5	8	6	8	4
Student	1	0	2	1	1	1	0	2
Unemployed looking for work	21	18	3	12	3	9	3	7

The non-residential fathers, the majority of whom were Black, experienced many hindrances to gainful employment. Several pointed to the fact that gainful employment, which they defined as decent paying, consistent employment, was difficult. Fathers expressed the sentiment that their labor was not fairly compensated. John said that, “for the most part, I never feel like the wage I’m getting paid at a job would be worth my effort ... I feel like anything somebody is paying me, I always be worth more than that.” Expounding on this feeling that their labor was not valued, James (II) discussed his view that those at the top do not care about their largely blue-collar jobs: “It’s like the people at the top is gonna get their money, you know... And it’s just like the bottom feeders, you know, fight for yourself.” Some of the men who worked for state government departments echoed the fathers’ feelings of underemployment. Victor said that “working for the State especially [his department] as a whole is one of those areas [where there were] places that were known to be very like underpaid.” Dave confirmed:

My joke with state employees is you don't ask a person who works for, um, the state if they have a second job, you ask them what their second job is. So, um, you know, state employees, teachers, um, we're not paid enough.

While men that are underemployed said that opportunities for gainful employment were nonexistent, there were many that experienced hindrances to obtaining and maintaining even an underpaid job. Transportation was a clear barrier, where some men were unable to keep up on their car payments, and as a result, had their car repossessed. James was a self-employed trucker, but his truck broke down and he did not buy a replacement because of the economic downturn. Others had their license revoked due to failure to pay child support. For example, Arnold was forced to rely on other extended family and friends to get his children back and forth to sporting practices and other events. After losing his driver's license because of failure to pay court-ordered child support, he was unable to be a reliable business partner in his landscaping business, causing him to have unstable and unreliable income each month. Those who fell behind on their child support payments were threatened with or served a jail sentence or had state-issued driver's licenses revoked. Reinstating a revoked license required them to pay fees that the fathers often didn't have the money for.

Another prominent hindrance was health, where in particular, the COVID-19 pandemic caused men to miss work. For example, JJ's son caught COVID, so JJ was forced to stay home from work to fulfill his parental responsibilities. JJ did not let his grandmother watch his son because of her health: "I'd rather take the chance of getting COVID, than one of my family members and something happened and then I'll be regretting it." What was responsible parental/familial behavior impacted JJ's job: "I had to stay home with him and I couldn't attend work and it was one of the reasons why I feel like I'm not working at the current moment."

While it is well documented that previous incarceration can be a hindrance to obtaining gainful employment (e.g., Geller et al., 2006; Huebner, 2005), an issue for many of the men in our study—the threat of future incarceration—also impacted their employment. Many men feared being put in jail as a result of defaulting on their child support payments and lived with ambient anxiety as a result. Brian said: "Every time you go to court, they wanna put you in jail because you have no income to back it up, you can't catch it up. So they wanna lock you up." The link between child support and employment was clear. Men needed a consistent job to afford their child support payments, otherwise they were at risk of being jailed. However, men made the point that they could not support their children from jail. Kevin said: "It makes no sense. At the end of the day, like why are you gonna keep sacrificing your time, because you can't do nothing in jail, then while you in jail it's still stacking up." Overwhelmingly, the men in our sample wanted to work, so the threat of incarceration acted as more of an anxiety inducer than a motivator. The threat of punishment from failure to pay child support loomed large in their narratives.

Masculinity and capitalism: It seems as if, even though some recognized the constraints the system put them under, many men idealized an American Dream narrative that rewards hard work and determination with upward socioeconomic mobility. Individualism and self-sufficiency were important values often cited by the fathers, and, consequently, many struggled to ask for help. Victor said:

I don't wanna keep asking [someone for] money for gas, let me go do some Uber or something. I've done that too on and off for several years just, I guess in a way when I feel like it. You know, do something a little money coming in and, I always had this thought or a dream of working for yourself, hell, just go out and do it. There's no time like now, so.

Like Victor, many of the men attempted to turn to entrepreneurship and self-employment to become self-sufficient and achieve their American Dream, and they used the GI payments to start this.

To the men, the American Dream cannot be achieved by everyone; however, it is available to people who will work for it. To rationalize the fact that GI coheres with the ethic of self-sufficiency and individualism, men stressed who should be eligible for GI payments: the hard-working person (usually a man) who will not rely on these payments forever but will use them to improve their stead in life. There was a stark divide between the good and the bad, or those who were down because of systemic constraints or bad luck vs. those who were down because they were lazy and virtue-less. It was even fine for men to have made mistakes that helped put them in their present precarious situation, as long as they were willing to put in the work to succeed. This divide was evident in how the men in the study said they spent the GI (to give them a leg up and get back on track) vs. how they say others may spend it (to further engrain laziness and lack of motivation). Robert summed it up:

Some people just going to take it in, you know, and just blow it on things that they didn't need to, you know. Because you have a lot of young people, they get this and the first thing they think about, oh party this, party that, you know, um, not thinking about the future, you know, because it's, because it's free money.

To distance themselves from the imagined unworthy recipient, the men positioned themselves as upstanding people who were worthy of GI benefits. Some even believed more strings should be attached to the receipt of these unconditional cash payments. Q said that participation in the MFC should be a prerequisite, “because, you know, like, you have to attend the meetings and... it should be something that's earned and not given.” This is consistent with the viewpoint that many men had about both GI and welfare, that it was useful but should only be for those willing to work to provide for themselves and their families, those able to self-actualize the American Dream.

Intersecting with the idea of the American Dream and the capitalist work ethic was the ideal form of masculinity that many men espoused. The fathers felt the need to appear strong. Again, difficulties were an expected part of life, but there always needed to be a plan to think ahead and move past them. This was expressed when the men talked about difficulties they encountered: they added a caveat to indicate they have moved past these difficulties. For example, Bob, when talking about his isolation after his mom's passing, said, “when my momma done passed, because I didn't have nobody to turn to—what I need to do or how I need to do it, but always bounced back.” Stressing this bounce back began to fulfill the hard work of the American Dream and conveyed the strength that men needed to have. Likewise, Brian, who we previously discussed in the section on social isolation, said, “Like, just not caring about nothing. Yeah. And—and I let it take me over, but I took it back for myself.” Through his strength to take it back for himself, he said he moved past his depression.

Case Study of the American Dream

James Earl, a man in his mid-40s, lives with his wife and four children. He referred to his family as “a [heavily] educated family” with “very highly intelligent” children who were “some [of the] top athletes in the country.” James Earl personified the intersection of the American Dream with masculinity and capitalism. He discussed using GI as a springboard in a way that made his interview seem like an advertisement for the idea of GI payments. He said the money contributed to him buying a house, finally purchasing a wedding ring for his wife, and taking new risks including purchasing land to start a small business. Previously, James Earl took an extreme economic fall where he went from living in a “nice little baby mansion” in another state to being homeless and living in a cheap hotel. Then, after what he described as “a real horrible moment,” the family relocated to South Carolina, where his wife found a new job, and he got his building inspection license and later started receiving GI payments while living in a cramped apartment to save on housing costs. Shortly thereafter, his family unexpectedly became homeowners, propelling their way up social ladder. The work ethic necessary to fight back from the brink of economic disaster was something that James Earl imparted to the entire family. They are all up early to exercise, a mandatory family activity. The vulnerability of being seen as a certain type of person extended through his children and his family, wanting to promote them as “the good kind” getting the best grades and being the best in their sports. James Earl stressed the impact GI can have for those willing to work and achieve the American Dream, as it,

give[s] us an opportunity to build a foundation so that we can help build up our country again, because without this some of us will fall. I know without it, for my family, I wouldn't have been able to come from living in a little apartment, being homeless to now being a business owner, um, being a farmer and being able to set up something for my children's children. And so if I, that would be the major thing. Give us an opportunity to create foundations, because there's a lot of people out here who have a lot of sense, a lot of gifts and talents but they can't ever use them because they can't afford to give up the little bit that they have to take on the much.

This idea of the American Dream, constructed alongside ideas of masculinity in a capitalist system, is difficult to reconcile with the grief, loss, and social isolation that many of the men experienced. For example, Robert concisely summarized the need to convey strength,

they might be struggling so bad, but on the outside, you know, they got this—they got this shield up and you can see them like well, hey, look they're doing good, but when you get back home, it's a different story, you know.

GI certainly helped many of the men. There seemed to be the need to appear strong and on the right track to fulfill the American Dream. Although it took individual effort to achieve the American Dream, their dream of wealth, opportunity, and social mobility was not only for the men themselves, but also for their children.

Interactions with the safety net: The system is set up on a work ethic/family ethic binary that positions parents in adversarial stances to receive meager benefits (Abramovitz, 2017).

The ideal family unit consists of two married parents (one male and one female) raising children in tandem. The father is the strong, working breadwinner and the mother is the submissive, kind, stay-at-home caregiver. However, the men in our study are involved in relationships that break this status quo. They were no longer with the mother of their children and did not live with the children either. Therefore, the system put them in a difficult situation where they had to provide financial support for a separate household.

Financial responsibilities to their children played a tremendous role as fathers navigated receipt of the GI. At Baseline, nearly 70% of fathers in the control group and over 80% of fathers in the treatment group had court-ordered financial obligations, including child support. The average monthly obligation was \$299 for the control group and \$335 for fathers receiving payments.

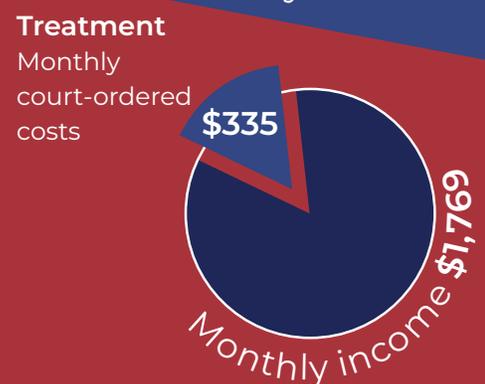
No one who paid child support seemed satisfied or happy to be doing so, with most describing their experiences in negative terms. Robert said, “child support is an automatic failure,” while Kingston poignantly stated that the burden of the payments “was just, getting just out of control. Like it was like starting to try to take over my life.” Q stated, “Child support was, was taking so much of my check, like I was working, I got paid, you know biweekly. ... I was only getting \$400 out of my check, out of my biweekly check.” Despite the fathers’ dissatisfaction with the program, some strained to sympathize with its existence. Kevin stated:

I mean anything that can help [the mothers]. I mean, you know—no, that’s, that would just be wrong. Leave that responsibility on the woman by themselves. I have no problem with child support. If I was able to do more, I’d do more ... I’m not saying that they were wrong for being mad, because y’all got the child and you all got bills, you know. You know, you depending on that money. Like, I get it.

However, few of the other fathers acknowledged how much work being the primary (and in many cases sole) caretaker of a child

Court-Ordered Financial Obligations of Fathers

At Baseline, nearly 70% of fathers in the control group and over 80% of fathers in the treatment group had court-ordered financial obligations, including child support.



took. They often bristled at having to pay child support, not because they did not want to support their child—all the fathers in our study believed that monetary provision was an essential piece of being a father—but because they saw the child support system as exploitative.

Similarly, Thomas noted that child support was an important form of assistance for the mothers, but also pointed out that it took away from the father being able to create a life with another person because of the financial constraints of trying to contribute to two households at once. Kingston echoed the challenges, saying that his current partner's income had to cover the bills, because "the child support was just killing me." In their view, child support was punishing the men for failing to succeed at marriage to the mothers of their children.

The structure of the child support system also disallowed fathers to directly contribute to their child(ren)'s well-being. Child support payments were taken directly from the father's paychecks and given to the custodial mother. This meant that the child may not associate the goods or services the money was used for with the father, and the father was distanced from the money generated from their labor that contributed to their child(ren)'s well-being. Jacob valued supporting his kids but was rankled at not getting to see how the money was spent:

I was paying daycare still when I went to court and the judge like, "What are you doing that for?" Because they're my kids. And she's like, "Well, we're not gonna do that no more. We're gonna set child support."

Dave blamed the system for creating distance between him and his children:

Um, and I think this is where the law is very detrimental to fathers, especially, uh, it's like the Disneyland dad syndrome, you know, they don't really respect me, because I don't really parent them. Um, I just take them to the trampoline park, I play games with them. Um, and it's not truly a co-parenting relationship in that instance.

In the eyes of the fathers, the system privileged the mother-child relationship over that of the father and made the father feel as if they were invisible, with little or no ability to do things legally with or for the child.

The child welfare system not only created financial stress by way of the payment itself but also because of how the system is structured and administered. The system acted as a slow-functioning bureaucracy, meaning that changes in the father's life circumstances or disputes that would affect child support payment amounts (e.g, loss of employment) took an extended amount of time and money. When Brian's military pay drastically decreased, child support did not immediately change his payments:

And then your child support stuff in order, because I was like \$22,000—because they were changing my military pay actually, when I didn't have any income for like two years before I started getting benefits. ... Like I was getting \$255 a month. They still seeing that I was getting \$4,700. See. I'm out of the service now. Um, that's not my check, but

they never changed it. It's hard fight to change it. ... You can do your modification, but then it took a year or two to get the modification to do this and that. Then the judge still might not grant it, might just say that you just do it, because you didn't want... So by the time you start getting your benefits, you're \$20,000 in the hole. You can never catch up.

Q detailed the high administrative costs associated with child support: "Even if you want to dispute anything with the child support occasionally, that costs us money." This blame and anger for having to pay child support often fell on the systems or the mothers, or a mixture of both. Q again commented:

My child support case... she put me on child support out of being spiteful and bitter and they still, you know, like I tell people, you having receipts, pictures of, whatever, any of that. It's basically DSS versus you. It ain't even her versus you no more.

Q said that his child's mother put him on child support out of spite and anger, but he did not realize that in many states, including South Carolina, in order for custodial mothers to be eligible for mainstream federal benefits like SNAP or WIC, they must first go through the child support system. Fathers often blamed the individual mothers for going to court, when it was really a feature of the system. Many, like Dave, viewed the court proceedings as the mother's fault:

A lot of it went through the courts, unfortunately our divorce was acrimonious and, uh, we didn't go to trial, thankfully we were able to settle in mediation, but she really, I just wanted to co-parent, she wanted as much control of the children as possible. And so and me, you know, I'm not a, I'm not a high-conflict kind of person, but I'm not gonna let someone try to take my kids from me. And so I fought back and you know, we had, it was not pretty.

He likened his time in court to a war, using words like "I fought back," indicating that he and the child's mother are on adversarial sides of parenthood.

Men talked about their frustration in a system that pushed them to be worse fathers through the heavy expectations it put in place. Q said,

they're automatically judging you. You can be, you can be, you can go in there being, being as honest you can be, and still wouldn't matter. ... But you get to the child support court in front of these folks and make it seem like I, I was the absent father. I ain't never been absent.

Likewise, Jacob lamented,

you walk in the courtroom, as a dad on child support, you're automatically guilty. ... You basically got to go in there and prove your innocence or prove that you're supp—doing what you're supposed to do, because at that point... they're ready to do whatever they

could do to slam you. South Carolina is a super pro-mom state.

Men believed the system expected them to fail as fathers, and it would not be a stretch to say that the system expected Black fathers to be absent and forced them to go through hurdle after hurdle to prove they did not belong in that category. Other fathers reiterated that theme: the system sometimes frustrates and demoralizes fathers so much that it encourages them to disappear. Such themes are also apparent in the Adult Mattering Scale (Elliott et al., 2004), where, aside from Baseline, there were no significant differences in the fathers' sense that others cared for them, looked to them for help, or invested resources in them between treatment and control groups.

Men actively fought against that pressure so as to stay present as a parent. This related to discussions around work ethic and family ethic, where the economy leaves men out of fulfilling the work ethic, while the system constrains men from fulfilling the family ethic. Many felt that the policy and system often entrapped them in misleading narratives about their identities, based on stereotypical assumptions about fathers required to pay child support. Jeffery said:

They automatically view you as, deadbeat Dad, you want child support, obviously you did something wrong to her, you know, it all, it all makes you look like the bad guy, you know... I don't even like bringing it up that I pay child support, 'cause immediately, despite my stature in this community, people automatically go, "oh."

While the men fought not to be viewed as deadbeats, several fathers also discussed feeling left out or excluded from goods or services offered by public assistance. Fathers felt like they had the world against them. They have struggled to locate jobs with living wages, experienced great loss in their lives, mental health problems, and a co-parent who, in many cases, they believed wished the worst for them. While this is a general statement that, of course, lacks some nuance, this formula felt true for the fathers. This led many to feel forgotten and unimportant. Thomas said, "I'm the type of person, I don't, I don't usually get chosen or selected for anything," hinting at feelings of unimportance. Even when he went through the process towards receiving his first GI payment, he waited on tenterhooks for the other shoe to drop: "Once chosen and it was like, okay, what's the catch? There's gotta be a catch. All those things I tend to think about." Likewise, Mike, when asked about his feelings of whether or not he would receive GI when he first signed up, stated: "I'm kind of used to disappointment." It appears as if these men live with loss and have gotten used to it.

The men in our study overwhelmingly felt like welfare and social programs were not meant for them. Bob felt that as a man, he was discriminated against when it comes to welfare access and admission in social programs.

Because it's hard because especially for me, you know, women they get food stamps, they get free housing, you know, and stuff like that. Men, we don't really get nothin'. If it wasn't for the \$500 [GI payments], we don't get nothing.

He continued in one memorable quote, "Free housing for us is a jail cell. You know, so you gotta look at it like that, though." Similarly, Kingston posited:

Like the state will do a lot for the mother but for a father, there's no programs. ... A mother can get programs, you know of course, the child support program and WIC programs and different programs like that to help mothers, single mothers. But what programs are there to help single fathers? There's no program to help single fathers.

Their statements were not completely true, because men have access to food stamps and housing programs, providing they meet means-testing income eligibility. However, overwhelmingly, the fathers felt forgotten and left out. While some reported receiving minimal SNAP benefits and another a Section 8 housing voucher, most only talked about getting unemployment benefits during the initial days of the COVID pandemic. Fathers in this sample often felt estranged from the social welfare system, and they felt that GI could be used to fill a gap in resources.

As much as most fathers valued hard work and self-sufficiency, some also felt pushed into work by how they perceived the state's neglect. Q said:

Y'all giving us these outrageous amounts to pay them a month, to pay the, to pay the mothers and now the mother's looking at, as though, like they ain—, they ain't got to work as hard because they got, let's just say a random amount, they got a free \$750 coming in every month. So that's the less they got to work, but you gotta work even harder.

Moreover, Dave talked about the way the system denied power to the men,

you know, I had to realize through the Midlands Fatherhood Coalition that, that was one of the great things in the class that I can speak highly about is as men, we're kind of made to feel impotent really without, and not in the sexual aspect, within the aspect of power.

Jeffrey spoke of how men were not culturally valued: "And the environment that she was raised in just don't value fathers. So I don't even blame her, you know."

This led to an overarching view that GI could be a huge benefit for fathers. To many of the men, it was a benefit tailored for them, unlike the welfare system and social service programs, which they believed to be designed for women. In a very real way, GI made many of the fathers feel seen in a world that they feel does not often see them.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the impacts of GI on individuals' health and overall well-being, it is essential to consider several limitations that might influence the interpretation and generalizability of the findings.

First, the study involved 230 respondents selected from a pool of 251 applicants. This sample was limited to Columbia, SC residents who lived within the 29203 and 29223 zip codes. Additionally, eligibility criteria included being or having recently been a client of the Midlands Fatherhood Coalition, which only serves male-identifying parents. The specific demographic focus of the pilot limits generalizability of the findings to other populations or regions, especially those with different socio-economic backgrounds. Second, MICE was deployed for imputing missing values. While the MICE method is recognized for its robustness in handling missing data, it is important to acknowledge that no imputation technique, including MICE, is entirely free from some degree of uncertainty. Despite rigorous checks and validations, the imputed data may not perfectly represent the true underlying patterns. This inherent limitation of imputation should be considered when interpreting the results. Finally, the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by significant challenges for Columbia and the surrounding areas. Beyond the direct health impacts, the pandemic had profound implications on individuals' mental well-being. The pervasive sense of uncertainty, the sorrow of losing loved ones, social distancing, and other health-related concerns likely influenced the mental health and stress levels of participants. Particularly with social safety net policies like unemployment benefits being phased out, individuals may have faced heightened stress as the economy started to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. This context may have influenced the results and outcomes of this study. Additionally, the pandemic had widespread economic impacts and cascading effects on cost of living, employment, and income in the region. These economic challenges could have influenced participants' perceptions as they navigated financial stressors exacerbated by the pandemic that are not controlled for in the study design. Therefore, the unique socio-economic conditions of the pandemic era could have significant bearing on the study's findings, affecting their applicability and relevance to other times and settings.

Discussion

The CLIMB project provided monthly payments of \$500 for a 12-month period to primarily Black identifying, non-residential fathers, who were associated with a community-based fatherhood support program. The great majority of fathers live in a world where their job experiences are marred by unemployment and underemployment. The fact that all the men in this study lived below the poverty line exaggerates the importance of GI payments. Five hundred dollars a month can make the difference in paying utilities, paying your phone bill, and affording groceries. The money also provided seed capital for the fathers to initiate sustainable entrepreneurial activities. Moreover, the boost in income allowed the men to be more available to their children, freeing up time from work, and allowing them to participate in memorable leisure activities or fulfill their children's requests for various goods or services that were previously unaffordable.

Famously, Nicholas Townsend (2002) referred to “the Package Deal,” four interconnected and mutually dependent values for men that he observed in the dominant culture: fatherhood, marriage, employment, and homeownership. The desires of the men in our study align with the Package Deal. They wished to be good fathers, to hold consistent romantic relationships, to be gainfully employed, and to own their own homes. However, many of these prescriptive values were denied to the fathers. In grasping for these elements, men were aspiring for an American Dream that is structurally unattainable.

It is clear in the data that most of the fathers were not able to parent as they wished because of constraints, whether that be their low-waged employment, child support payments, or physical distance from their children. In both a micro and a macro sense, social forces worked together to make the men feel isolated, alone, and forgotten. Individually, the fathers’ sense of self was influenced by how both people and institutions interacted with them. In a broader sense, the conditions of capitalism and social support isolated men from their hopes, dreams, and imagined lives. The system frustrated and demoralized fathers so much that it encouraged them to disappear. Fathers had to actively fight against that pressure to stay present.

What is clear from the study is these men defy the stereotype of a “deadbeat dad.” This study confirmed what has been previously found, that, if a father is absent, it may be because of structural constraints rather than his unwillingness to be present. Capitalism and safety nets do not allow Black men to perform their duties in the way they desire. This, along with mainstream (White) notions of fatherhood becoming internalized, is reminiscent of when civil rights activist Floyd McKissick criticized the infamous Moynihan Report (1965), which said that the culture of absent Black fathers contributed to poverty in the Black community. McKissick said,

my major criticism of the report is that it assumes that middle-class American values are the correct values for everyone in America. ... Moynihan thinks that everyone should have a family structure like his own. Moynihan also emphasizes the negative aspects of the Negroes and then seems to say that it's the individual's fault when it's the damn system that really needs changing (Meehan, 1996).

This echoes scholar Dorothy Roberts’s assertion that, “it’s far easier to blame individuals than it is to indict the policies and culture that have structured poor people’s lives” (Hing, 2011).

For these men, something is truly broken regarding the administration of public benefits. The men themselves seemed to fall prey to the same line of thinking that Roberts critiques above, or at least, a version of it. While many saw the way that child support is broken, they went on to blame the mother for seeking it in the first place, even though South Carolina mandates custodial women to seek child support if they want to receive public benefits.

However, within this resistance and desire to “do things differently,” there does not appear to be a critical consciousness around what their own fathers went through. Most men in the interviews stated

that their father was not around much when they were growing up. Some never knew him, some only knew him peripherally, while others did not have a relationship with their father until they were an adult. However, a puzzling phenomenon took place wherein they did not apply some of the reasoning from their lives to their own fathers. For example, many men cited how the welfare and child support system, as well as the children's mothers, were against them. Therefore, the relationship with their children suffered. However, aside from Jeffrey, they never extrapolated these conclusions to their own fathers. Those absences were individualized and a result of his being a deadbeat, whereas CLIMB participants' absence (for those who discuss not being as involved in their children's lives) was the result of the system being against them. Perhaps there is a marked difference between them and their fathers. Or perhaps their fathers encountered similar barriers, and their sons just did not see them. Clearly, this study is not a random sample of fathers, because the fact that they are involved in the MFC speaks to their desire to be "good" fathers. However, there seems to be a gap in their logic when comparing their experiences with those of their own fathers.

GI acts as a buttress against some of these social forces. The \$500 payments improved both immediate financial well-being and afforded men the opportunity to plan for the future. What did it mean for future relationships with children? That those relationships could improve. GI does not automatically improve fathers' desire to be present. What it can do is improve individual social conditions that allow men to overcome structural barriers to become more present. For example, having extra money each month allowed these fathers to breathe a little bit while still providing for their children, to not pick up extra shifts and instead spend time together with their child. If being a father consists of providing, teaching, guiding, and protecting, all actions that necessitate physical proximity, is it possible to fulfill these responsibilities from afar? As Victor says, being a good father is about: "Presence among everything, I think it starts from that. Once you [are] present, you're around, a lot of things you know can happen to follow suit." However, a lack of presence in their children's lives can create problems, which unfortunately rang true for many of the fathers in the study.

While not a panacea for the social forces and structures working against these men, GI can be an important corrective to the status quo. It also acted to help these men feel seen. They finally felt like someone was caring for them. Even though some men espoused inaccurate information about the administration of benefits, they still needed to feel like someone cares. Kingston said it beautifully when he stated, "this program, it helps and it gives you that little bit of light in that tunnel that—of darkness, when everything seems like it's closing in on you."

Center for Guaranteed Income Research

The Center for Guaranteed Income Research (CGIR) was established in 2020 at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Policy & Practice with the aim of developing a shared body of knowledge on unconditional cash transfers.

At CGIR, distinguished academics and professionals in this field lead pilot guaranteed income programs and oversee the planning and implementation of research initiatives. CGIR is led by two Founding Directors: Dr. Amy Castro, Associate Professor of Social Policy & Practice at the University of Pennsylvania, and Dr. Stacia West, who holds a faculty fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania in addition to her primary role as an Associate Professor at the College of Social Work at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville.

CGIR conducts applied cash transfer studies and pilot designs that contribute to the empirical scholarship on cash, economic mobility, poverty, and narrative change. Our investigations build upon existing literature on cash transfers and incorporate evaluation practices and lessons learned from our previous research on guaranteed income and the gender and racial wealth gap.

All of our research is grounded in Durr's (1993) fundamental question: "What influences policy sentiment?" With this in mind, we are committed to conducting public science that challenges prevailing narratives surrounding poverty, deservedness, and economic mobility, utilizing diverse approaches such as multi-site ethnography, politically-driven sampling, and data visualization.

Our dashboards, created in partnership with Stanford Basic Income Lab, feature filters at the pilot level, allowing individuals to access and compare information while obtaining detailed insight into our investigations.

**Please direct all inquiries
about this study to:**

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Appendix A

Comparative Analysis of Select Outcome Measures: Control vs. Treatment Groups

Outcomes	Adjusted Mean Control	Adjusted Mean Treatment	Estimated Impact	Confidence Interval Lower	Confidence Interval Upper	Standard Error
Financial Well-Being						
Baseline	43.01	42.55	-0.46	1.18	-2.78	1.18
6 month	47.15	47.32	0.17	0.87	-1.54	0.87
12 month	46.26	46.21	-0.05	1.04	-2.09	1.04
18-month	48.23	48.42	0.19	1.00	-1.77	1.00
Kessler						
Baseline	18.07	18.84	0.77	-0.27	1.81	0.53
6 month	17.15	18.56	1.41***	0.53	2.29	0.45
12 month	18.11	19.02	0.91	-0.05	1.86	0.49
18 month	18.05	18.19	0.14	-0.84	1.11	0.49
Annual Household Income						
Baseline	20,206.61	21,221.82	1,015.21	-575.42	2,605.84	807.29
6 month	25,345.22	24,916.17	-429.05	-1,526.99	668.89	557.24
12 month	24,299.72	23,284.62	-1,015.10	-2,395.93	365.73	700.81
18 month	23,565.09	23,795.36	230.26	-1,294.89	1,755.42	774.06
Perceived Stress						
Baseline	6.52	7.09	0.57**	0.12	1.01	0.22
6 month	6.45	6.73	0.28	-0.01	0.57	0.15
12 month	6.60	6.76	0.16	-0.17	0.50	0.17
18 month	6.07	6.63	0.56***	0.26	0.86	0.15

Outcomes	Adjusted Mean Control	Adjusted Mean Treatment	Estimated Impact	Confidence Interval Lower	Confidence Interval Upper	Standard Error
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Chaos						
Baseline	26.98	27.96	0.98*	0.06	1.91	0.47
6 month	27.40	26.89	-0.51	-1.26	0.25	0.38
12 month	27.27	26.76	-0.51	-1.35	0.33	0.43
18 month	26.42	25.99	-0.43	-1.13	0.27	0.35

Affirmation of Meaning and Value of Life						
Baseline	14.71	14.30	-0.41***	-0.64	-0.18	0.12
6 month	14.77	14.61	-0.16	-0.35	0.03	0.10
12 month	14.56	14.48	-0.08	-0.30	0.13	0.11
18 month	13.82	13.55	-0.27**	-0.48	-0.06	0.11

Acceptance						
Baseline	13.38	13.39	0.01	-0.34	0.36	0.18
6 month	13.93	14.02	0.09	-0.14	0.32	0.12
12 month	13.95	14.21	0.26*	0.00	0.51	0.13
18 month	14.22	14.31	0.09	-0.13	0.31	0.11

Courage						
Baseline	13.05	12.96	-0.09	-0.33	0.16	0.12
6 month	12.36	12.69	0.33***	0.18	0.49	0.08
12 month	12.88	12.92	0.04	-0.17	0.26	0.11
18 month	12.69	12.74	0.05	-0.15	0.24	0.10

Outcomes	Adjusted Mean Control	Adjusted Mean Treatment	Estimated Impact	Confidence Interval Lower	Confidence Interval Upper	Standard Error
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Faith						
Baseline	37.56	36.59	-0.97***	-1.61	-0.34	0.32
6 month	36.04	36.04	0.00	-0.48	0.48	0.24
12 month	36.76	36.34	-0.42	-0.93	0.09	0.26
18 month	35.89	35.81	-0.08	-0.57	0.40	0.24

Self-Transcendence						
Baseline	26.31	25.46	-0.85***	-1.28	-0.43	0.22
6 month	24.53	24.14	-0.39**	-0.70	-0.09	0.15
12 month	25.03	24.74	-0.29	-0.65	0.066	0.18
18 month	24.53	24.13	-0.40**	-0.72	-0.09	0.16

Agency						
Baseline	23.14	22.71	-0.43	-1.08	0.23	0.33
6 month	23.86	23.78	-0.08	-0.48	0.31	0.20
12 month	23.26	23.41	0.15	-0.34	0.65	0.25
18 month	23.85	24.33	0.48*	0.05	0.91	0.22

Pathway						
Baseline	23.50	23.27	-0.23	-0.92	0.45	0.35
6 month	23.89	24.56	0.67	0.29	1.06	0.20
12 month	24.10	23.94	-0.16	-0.71	0.39	0.28
18 month	24.08	24.00	-0.08	-0.58	0.43	0.25

Outcomes	Adjusted Mean Control	Adjusted Mean Treatment	Estimated Impact	Confidence Interval Lower	Confidence Interval Upper	Standard Error
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Total Hope						
Baseline	46.64	45.98	-0.66	-1.87	0.55	0.62
6 month	47.75	48.34	0.59	-0.14	1.32	0.37
12 month	47.36	47.35	-0.01	-0.99	0.97	0.50
18 month	47.92	48.33	0.41	-0.46	1.27	0.44

Awareness						
Baseline	31.77	30.93	-0.84**	-1.51	-0.17	0.34
6 month	31.67	31.52	-0.15	-0.65	0.34	0.25
12 month	31.85	31.49	-0.36	-0.94	0.21	0.29
18 month	32.07	31.78	-0.29	-0.79	0.21	0.25

Importance						
Baseline	37.40	36.57	-0.83	-1.68	0.01	0.43
6 month	37.76	37.22	-0.54	-1.11	0.039	0.29
12 month	36.82	36.48	-0.34	-0.99	0.32	0.33
18 month	36.50	36.74	0.24	-0.32	0.80	0.28

Reliance						
Baseline	24.08	23.52	-0.56	-1.12	0.00	0.29
6 month	24.02	24.29	0.27	-0.11	0.64	0.19
12 month	23.97	23.65	-0.32	-0.77	0.13	0.23
18 month	23.98	23.77	-0.21	-0.64	0.21	0.22

Outcomes	Adjusted Mean Control	Adjusted Mean Treatment	Estimated Impact	Confidence Interval Lower	Confidence Interval Upper	Standard Error
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Average General Health						
Baseline	77.48	75.10	-2.38**	-4.41	-0.35	1.03
6 month	70.61	71.35	0.74	-0.90	2.38	0.83
12 month	72.37	71.50	-0.87	-2.64	0.91	0.90
18 month	71.37	71.50	0.13	-1.30	1.56	0.73

Health Limits						
Baseline	84.94	80.78	-4.17	-7.38	-0.96	1.63
6 month	77.10	77.40	0.30	-2.05	2.65	1.19
12 month	79.12	81.25	2.13	-0.34	4.59	1.25
18 month	85.34	84.15	-1.19	-3.39	1.01	1.12

SF_36 Physical						
Baseline	79.01	71.75	-7.26***	-11.68	-2.83	2.25
6 month	76.53	74.56	-1.96	-4.88	0.95	1.48
12 month	75.95	70.00	-5.95***	-9.65	-2.26	1.88
18 month	76.34	74.25	-2.09	-5.27	1.10	1.62

Footnotes:

Baseline Mean: Adjusted average score prior to any intervention

6/12/18-month Mean: Adjusted average score at the respective time mark

Estimated Impact: The Mean difference between the treatment and control groups

Standard Error: Indicates the precision of the impact estimates

95% CI Lower/Upper: Bounds of the 95% confidence interval for the impact estimate

* Indicates statistical significance: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Appendix B

Table 3. Attrition Across the Time Period (in %)

Time period	Sample Sizes		Overall Attrition	Differential Attrition
	Treatment	Control		
Baseline	100	132		
6 month	71	42	51	39
12 month	69	63	43	21
18 month	54	52	54	14