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Father Involvement Research Alliance

Immigrant Fathers Cluster

Immigrant Fathers Cluster Executive Summary Father Involvement Community Research Forum Spring 2006

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Fathers who are new immigrants and/or refugees to Canada face multiple stressors. These stressors are often inter-related and may include underemployment or unemployment. Role reversal occurs when mothers obtain work outside the home resulting in fathers facing social isolation and loss of self-esteem. These men may also be impacted by trauma induced by war and forced into refugee status that may lead to feelings of loss, grief and depression.

This study examines the experiences of Russian and Sudanese immigrant/refugee men as fathers in a large urban centre in Canada. One of the primary purposes of the study was to shed light on issues facing immigrant/refugee fathers, which in turn could inform service developers, providers and policy makers.

Summary

The roles that fathers play are determined by a variety of factors including cultural expectations. When those cultural expectations change as a result of immigration, there is a risk of significant pressure to either adapt or adopt new roles. Many immigrant and refugee fathers are at risk for stress factors, which strengthens the need for increased social support. Some of the pertinent stressors include:

- **Underemployment or unemployment.**
These factors can be devastating to the self-esteem of fathers. The loss of the traditional role as breadwinner has been linked to the use of punitive measures with children, increased alcoholism, and domestic abuse.
- **Social Isolation**
Many of the immigrant and refugee new Canadians are of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. Feelings of isolation and discrimination intensify the social, psychological and economic pressures faced. In addition, many of the immigrants and refugees come from the countries that were at war with one another and as a result, the clashes and hostilities that came with them to Canada further prevents community integration.
- **Barriers to helping services**
There is a growing awareness of the barriers that prevent new Canadians from fully utilizing community social and health services that offer support to individuals and families. Fathers who wish for support related to this role face an additional barrier. Women provide most of the child-focused services. Men often do not feel comfortable accessing these services and women workers are often uncomfortable in their role with fathers.
- **Role Reversal**
Among immigrant and refugee families where the father is unemployed, many fathers are, through a lack of choice, fulfilling the primary caregiving and child rearing roles. With appropriate support and training, fathers possess the potential to help their children make the transition to their new country and to provide for their healthy development.
- **Trauma induced by war, enforced refugee status**
It is well accepted that families who have been affected by trauma events or who are forced into refugee status require special intervention and attention. Adults appear to need to move through several stages as they seek to restore mental health after being uprooted and displaced.

As a result, the experience of being an immigrant or refugee may have a significant impact on the fathering role. In addition to the previously mentioned stress factors these men may have strong beliefs, values, and traditions about the nature of the family and father-child relationships that may or may not be supported in Canada.

This study examined the experiences of Russian and Sudanese immigrant/refugee men as fathers in a large urban center in Canada. Since the 1990's the number of Russian and Sudanese newcomers has increased. In the case of Russian immigrants the collapse of the Soviet Union was one factor contributing to the exodus. It must be noted that some of the Russian immigrants were Russian Jews, who initially settled in Europe and Israel prior to migrating to Canada. The majority of the Sudanese are refugees who have left Sudan because of the ongoing conflict and environmental destruction that has occurred in southern Sudan. The largest Sudanese community exists in Toronto with the second largest concentration in Calgary.

Methodology

The study utilized Patton's pragmatic qualitative research design that allows the researcher to conduct his/her research study without the need to choose a specific qualitative tradition. In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 Sudanese and 14 Russian newcomer men. All of the interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed. The Calgary Immigrant Aid Society, Calgary Jewish Family Services, The New Sudan Association of Alberta provided assistance in identifying and recruiting the participants for the study.

The interview guide consisted of questions that covered areas such as

- Meaning of fatherhood
- Values influencing fathering role
- Influences on fathering role
- Interaction with children (types)
- Decision making in the family
- Challenges being a father in the Canadian contexts
- Services/supports provided or used to assist fathering role in Canada

An initial thematic analysis was completed involving all of the completed interviews.

Father Involvement Research Alliance* CURA

Immigrant Fathers Cluster

Focus: The challenges faced by immigrant men (Russian and Sudanese) as they parent in Canada including role reversals of parents and children due to children's rapid acculturation; racism and its impact on immigrant fathering; family and neighbourhood isolation and the impact of un/under-employment on fathering. Based in Calgary with links to Toronto and Montreal, and led by Dr. David Este, University of Calgary.

Gay Fathers Cluster

Focus: The effects of homophobia on gay fathering; social, legal, and cultural barriers to fathering for gay men; access to services for gay fathers and what can be learned about parenting from men operating outside of traditional gender dynamics. Based in Toronto and led by Rachel Epstein, coordinator LGBT Parenting Network/David Kelly Services, Family Service Association of Toronto (FSAT).

Separated and Divorced Fathers Cluster

Focus: The salient legal, emotional, and financial issues faced by separated and divorced fathers; the strengths they bring to their family relationships; identification of patterns that sustain and interfere with positive father involvement; identification of needs and evidence based solutions. Based in Vancouver and Vancouver Island, and led by Dr. Edward Kruk, School of Social Work and Family Studies, University of British Columbia.

New Fathers Cluster

Focus: The support services provided to fathers through the first eighteen months of the child's life, including pre-natal period; the impact of becoming a dad on the father's physical and mental health and on the father's personal development; and examination of the degree of support afforded to fathers by the health care system. Based in London, York Region, and Toronto, and led by Ed Bader, Co-Chair FIRA (Community): Catholic Community Services of York Region.

Young Fathers Cluster

Focus: The multiple dimensions for young fathers that need support (work, school, housing, relationships); challenging the negative perceptions of young fathers as expressed through social services and the courts; identification of programming needs for young fathers. Based in the Ottawa/Hull Region and led by Dr. Annie Devault, Université du Québec en Outaouais.

Fathers of Children with Special Needs Cluster

Focus: The challenges of fathering a special needs child and determining the factors that limit or facilitate involvement; improving the practice of "family-centred" care with fathers of children who experience a chronic health condition and/or a physical disability. Based in Toronto and London, and led by Dr. Ted McNeill, Director of Social Work, The Hospital for Sick Children.

Indigenous Fathers Cluster

Focus: The unique issues affecting Indigenous fathers' caring for young children (0-6) enrolled in centre-based child care; improving community outreach to Indigenous fathers; creating meaningful roles for Indigenous fathers involved with their children in child care and development programs; and to alter program structures, program materials, and program activities in order to better serve fathers. Based in Victoria, Vancouver and northern British Columbia, and led by Dr. Jessica Ball, University of Victoria.

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