

## **ISPS Project Summary**

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### *“Paternal Constructs and Social Life among Urban Black Men”*

Social science has focused substantially on black family life from a matrifocal perspective. [Taylor, et al. \(1990, p. 996 \)](#) noted that “in contrast to the volume of work focused on the position of black women, the role of black men in families is one of the most conspicuously neglected areas of family research. The absence of a reliable knowledge base on the role of black men in families has resulted in a portrayal of black men as peripheral to family and as performing poorly in the family roles of spouse and father.” [Nelson \(2004, p. 427\)](#) echoes these words: “Once it was customary to begin an article on fathers with a complaint over their relative absence in the sociological literature.”

A lack of engagement with black men’s roles as fathers has not been limited to the academy. In response to the need to understand the family and social lives of all men, governments and nonprofits have established policies and programs to focus on paternal and social issues, particularly in urban settings. My research project explored the ways in which community-based organizations are addressing these facets of black men’s lives, from fatherhood to employment opportunities and educational advancement, through seven organizations in New York City. In the tradition of such scholarly works as Stack’s (1974) [All our Kin](#) and Anderson’s (1978, 1999) [Place on a Corner](#) and [Code of the Street](#), I conducted participant observation of program activities as they were facilitated, as well as semi-structured interviews in naturalistic settings (community-based organizations, “hang-out spots,” restaurants, etc.) with practitioners and participants in these programs.

My data from these investigations yielded a few consistent themes. First, the men believed that these community programs provided both enhancement and affirmation of their current paternal practices. A recent [research report](#) affirms this finding, showing that black fathers are just as involved (and in some areas, more involved) in family life. Second, the men experienced increased human and social capital. Many of the men come from backgrounds where these resources are lacking, and thus benefit from the access to skills and training that the organizations provide. Finally, in some cases, the men reported partially transformed perceptions of mainstream institutions as a result of their positive experiences with the organizations, which work with many of them as they navigate these institutions (e.g., courts & schools). This is important given the profound lack of trust that blacks typically have in American institutions due to the persistent discrimination and marginality they experience in everyday life (see Anderson, 1999). Across all of these themes, my findings suggest that perspectives on black family life need to reflect the realities of this disparate group not preconceived ideologies.