

**WELFARE REFORM, FERTILITY  
AND FATHER INVOLVEMENT**

**Center for Research on Child Wellbeing  
Working Paper #01-13-FF**

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## **Welfare Reform, Fertility and Father Involvement**

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### *Article Summary*

Recognizing that most poor families are single-parent families, the federal welfare reform law of 1996 emphasized the responsibility of both parents to support their children. In addition to strengthening the child support enforcement system, the law included several provisions to decrease nonmarital childbearing and to promote two-parent families. This article focuses on the important role fathers play in children's lives and how public policies have affected childbearing and father involvement. Key observations are:

- Children in father-absent families often have fewer economic and socio-emotional resources from their parents, and do not fare as well on many outcome measures, as children living with both biological parents.
- Efforts to reduce the rising number of father-absent families by focusing on preventing unwanted pregnancy among unmarried women, especially teen girls, have met with some success, particularly those programs seeking to alter adolescents' life opportunities in addition to providing education or family planning services.
- Efforts to encourage greater father involvement by focusing almost exclusively on increasing absent parents' child support payments reap only minimal benefits for poor children, because their absent parents often have few resources and little incentive to make support payments.
- To date, efforts to increase the emotional involvement of unmarried fathers with their children have produced disappointing results, but new research suggests that such programs can make a difference when they target fathers and begin at the time of a new child's birth.

Many children will spend some time living away from their fathers, deprived of the financial and emotional resources fathers can provide. Because of the importance of fathers to child well-being, the authors conclude that new directions in research and public policies are needed to encourage greater father involvement across the wide diversity of family arrangements that exist in society today.

The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) represented an historic shift in our nation's policy toward poor families and children.<sup>1</sup> In addition to requiring that low-income parents assume greater responsibility for their own economic well-being through increased work, the reform legislation included provisions to discourage births outside of marriage, to promote and strengthen two-parent families, and to encourage father involvement (at least with respect to financial support). These provisions reflect—and contribute to—a growing awareness of the importance of fathers for children.

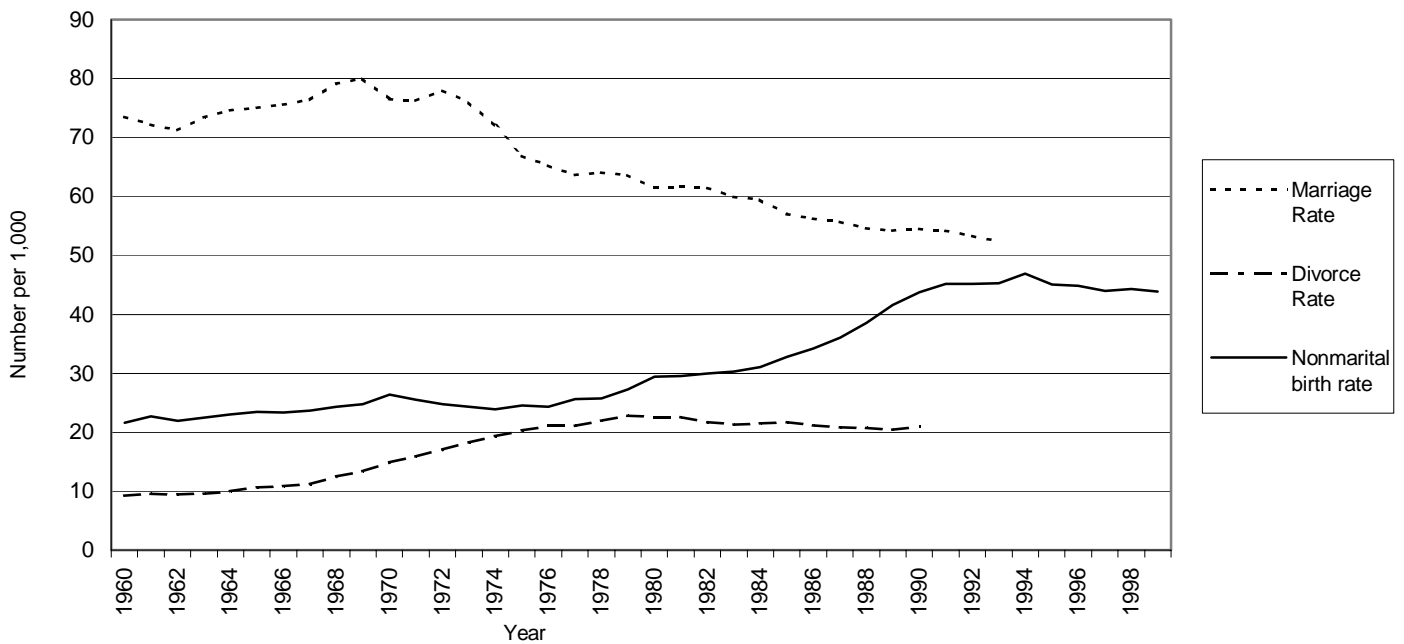
Until recently, discussions about welfare policy for low-income families have largely excluded fathers, except with respect to their frequent failure to pay child support. Despite rising concern since the 1980s about the negative consequences of childbearing outside of marriage and single parenthood (particularly for children, but also for society), most policy and research about families on welfare has focused only on single mothers. However, research on fatherhood in the last decade has pointed to the range of contributions that fathers can make in their children's lives,<sup>2</sup> as well as to the barriers that some fathers face to providing economic and emotional support for their children.

This article draws on recent research to examine the role of fathers in children's lives and how policy may affect father involvement. The first section reviews the recent demographic trends affecting low-income families, followed by an outline of the evidence concerning how father involvement affects fertility and child well-being. Policies to decrease nonmarital fertility and increase father involvement are described, along with suggestions about how programs can better address the needs of disadvantaged fathers and families to promote child well-being.

## Recent Trends and Effects on Children

Several major demographic trends in the latter half of the 20th century have affected the composition of families in the U.S., especially low-income families. In particular, declining marriage rates, increasing divorce rates, and increasing rates of births to unmarried women (see figure 1) have combined to increase the likelihood that children will spend time living away from their fathers. Although many unmarried parents work together to raise their children by cohabiting or maintaining frequent contact, father involvement for most low-income families in this situation is not necessarily stable.

**Figure 1: Marriage, Divorce and Nonmarital Birth Rates**



Sources: Clarke, S.C. Advance Report of Final Marriage Statistics, 1989 and 1990. *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*. Vol. 43, No. 12(S). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. July 14, 1995. Table 1, p. 7. Clarke, S.C. Advance Report of Final Divorce Statistics, 1989 and 1990. *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*. Vol. 43, No. 9(S). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. March 22, 1995. Table 1, p. 9. Ventura, S.J. and Bachrach, C.A. Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940-99. *National Vital Statistics Report*. Vol. 48, No. 16. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. October 18, 2000. Table 1, p. 17.

Note: Nonmarital birth rate is per 1,000 unmarried women ages 15-44, marriage rate is per 1,000 unmarried women ages 15 and over, and divorce rate is per 1,000 married women ages 15 and over.

## **Rising Number of Non-Traditional Families**

Fewer children today spend their entire childhood in homes with two married parents than was the case in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A major underlying trend contributing to changes in family composition is the overall decline in marriage rates. This decline is driven by a combination of people waiting longer to get married the first time, not marrying at all, or not remarrying following divorce. Between 1960 and 1998, the median age at marriage for women rose from 20.3 to 25.0 years, and for men, from 22.8 to 26.7 years.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the rate of marriage among unmarried women declined from 73.5 per 1,000 in 1960 to 52.3 in 1993.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, declines in marriage have been largely offset by a dramatic rise in nonmarital cohabitation that has blurred the boundaries of “marriage.” Although the mean age at marriage has risen, when cohabitation is considered along with marriage, the average age at union formation (either marriage or cohabitation) has remained relatively constant.<sup>5</sup> In 1995, 49% of women ages 30 to 34 had cohabited at some time in their lives, and the proportion of persons entering first marriages who had previously cohabited was 53%.<sup>6</sup> For some couples, cohabitation may serve as a precursor to marriage, while for others—particularly those with low educational attainment and earnings, who are at greatest risk of receiving welfare—cohabitation is more likely to serve as a substitute for marriage altogether.<sup>7,8</sup>

The second major trend affecting American families is the increase in marital instability. Divorce rates more than doubled during the last half the 20<sup>th</sup> century, increasing from 9.2 to 22.8 divorces per 1,000 married women (15 years and older) between 1960 and 1979.<sup>9</sup> Over half of all marriages begun in the 1980s were projected to end in divorce.<sup>10</sup> Since 1980, the divorce rate has leveled off, but at a level much higher than during (and before) the 1960s (see figure 1). As of 1990, the divorce rate was still at 20.9 divorces per 1,000 married women.

The third trend is the increased proportion of births that occur outside of marriage. Between 1960 and 1999, nonmarital births as a proportion of all births rose from 5% to 33%.<sup>11</sup> The trend in nonmarital childbearing is driven by the delay in marriage, the decline in births among married couples (relative to births among unmarried couples), and the increase in childbearing among unmarried women. The birth rate among unmarried women rose from 21.6 to 46.9 per 1,000 between 1960 and 1994, and has since declined slightly. Although nonmarital birth rates for teenagers (ages 15 to 19) also have risen steadily since 1940, as a proportion of all unmarried births, they have actually declined. Teen births accounted for 50% of all unmarried births in 1970, but only 31% in 1997 (due in part to the rising average age of the never-married population).<sup>12</sup>

Taken together, these demographic trends have increased the likelihood that children will live apart from at least one of their biological parents (usually the father) before they reach adulthood. This could occur within multiple family contexts: the child could live alone with the mother, with the mother and her new cohabiting partner, or in a re-married family with the mother and a stepfather.<sup>13</sup> Single-parent families (defined as unmarried mothers or fathers and their children living alone or with the parent's cohabiting partner) represented 9% of all families with children in 1960, and 27% in 1998.<sup>14</sup> Of children born in the 1980s, it is estimated that about half will spend some time in a single-parent family before they reach age 18.<sup>15</sup>

The overall rise in single-parent families has been a source of concern among researchers and policymakers alike, particularly because of the lower parental and economic resources generally found in such families. Yet, recent research has highlighted the fact that single-parent families represent neither a homogenous nor a static group. "Traditional" family formation typically followed a linear course: dating followed by marriage, sexual activity and then

childbearing. But today, cohabitation, intercourse, and parenthood all can occur outside of marriage, yielding a range of complex and diverse family arrangements.

The composition of the population of single-parent families has changed dramatically in the past two decades. In 1976, only 17% of single mothers were never married, but by 1997, never-married mothers represented 46% of all single mothers.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the changing marital histories of single mothers, rising cohabitation portends that living arrangements may now serve as a more important criterion for determining family structure than marital status.<sup>17</sup> According to one estimate, 15% of families classified as “single-mother” families by marital status in 1987 included a cohabiting male.<sup>18</sup> Also, 41% of all nonmarital births in the early 1990s occurred to cohabiting couples.<sup>19</sup> Such statistics imply that many “single” mothers are not rearing their children alone and that great variation can be found in the family history and current circumstances of unmarried mothers and their children, including the extent to which such families can be appropriately characterized as “father-absent.”

The combination of these trends suggests the emergence of a new family type—the “fragile family”—comprised of unmarried parents who are working together to raise their child(ren) either by cohabiting or maintaining frequent contact.<sup>20</sup> Such families are deemed “fragile” because of the multiple risks associated with nonmarital childbearing (including poverty) and to signify the vulnerability of the parents’ relationship. Union dissolution rates are much higher among cohabiting couples than among married couples; this is true particularly in the United States, but also in Western European countries where cohabitation is even more prevalent.<sup>21</sup>

### **Family Structure and Child Well-being**

Growing family diversity has raised concerns about child well-being because not all family experiences are equally beneficial for children. A multitude of studies have documented that

children in single-parent families do not fare as well on a range of outcome measures as children living with both biological parents.<sup>22</sup> Although the mechanisms by which family structure affects children's well-being have not been fully determined, it is clear that children in single-parent families are often deprived of two types of resources that a father might provide—economic and socio-emotional. The economic consequences can be most easily quantified—families with no male present are much more likely to be poor, with adverse effects on child development and well-being.<sup>23</sup> In 1998, for example, the poverty rate for female-headed families with children was 39.2% compared with 7.8% for male-present families with children.<sup>24</sup> Children in single-parent families are also disadvantaged because they are less likely to have highly-involved fathers who provide them with important parental attention and emotional support. Nonresidential fathers see their children less often than residential fathers, and lack of interaction decreases the likelihood that a father and child will develop a close relationship.<sup>25</sup> As described further in the next section, a father's participation in his child's life—both financially and emotionally—offers important benefits.

Significant attention in both academic publications and the popular press has focused on the causes and consequences of the rise in single-parent families, and the need to collect child support from noncustodial fathers. Spurred by a growing awareness of single parenthood in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars began to estimate the income and capabilities of noncustodial fathers to pay child support. These earlier analyses highlighted the dearth of available firsthand information about low-income men and their families and showed that national survey data—which are most frequently used by social scientists to study individuals and families—seriously under-represented fathers who do not live with their children; this is because such men are difficult to locate or because they (intentionally or unknowingly) misreport their parental status.<sup>26</sup> As a result, information on the characteristics of “fragile families” is relatively new and is just beginning to be

described in the research literature. Building on the early studies of noncustodial fathers' earnings and relationships, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study was launched in January 1997 to investigate the conditions and capabilities of new unmarried parents and the consequences for children (see box 1).

**Box 1: The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study**

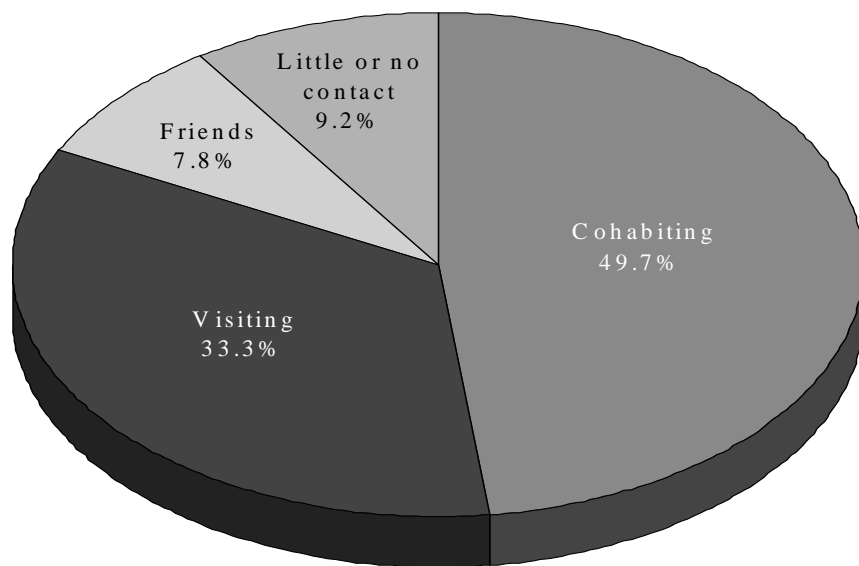
The Fragile Families Study was designed by a team of researchers at Princeton University and Columbia University with an innovative, integrated framework to provide information about three areas of great interest to policymakers and community leaders: nonmarital childbearing, welfare reform, and the role of fathers. The study follows a birth cohort of approximately 3,700 children born to unmarried parents in twenty U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. New mothers are interviewed in person at the hospital within 48 hours of having given birth, and fathers are interviewed in person either in the hospital or are located as soon as possible thereafter. Follow-up interviews will be conducted when the child is 12, 30 and 48 months old. The study is representative of nonmarital births within each city, and the full sample is representative of all nonmarital births to parents residing in large cities nationwide. Also, married parents (a total of about 1,200 couples) are being interviewed in each of the cities for comparison. All income groups are included, but many unmarried parents are low-income. Baseline interviews in all twenty cities were completed in the fall of 2000 and show that 41% of unmarried mothers included in the study had incomes below poverty, and 39% were receiving welfare. The 12-month follow-up survey is expected to be complete by the end of 2001.

For more information, see Fragile Families website at: <http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies>.

Data from the baseline interviews in the Fragile Families Study highlight two key findings about unmarried parents with a newborn child. First, most unmarried couples are closely connected to each other—and invested in their new child—around the time of the child's birth. Over 80% of mothers report that they are romantically involved with the baby's father at the time the child is born (see fig. 2). Most fathers are involved during the pregnancy and around the time of birth: over three-fourths helped the mother during the pregnancy, and/or visited the mother in the hospital. Also, nearly all (99%) of the fathers who participated in the study expressed a desire

to be involved in raising their child(ren), and 93% of mothers say that they want the father to be involved. Even among the mothers who are not romantically involved with the father at the time of birth, fully two-thirds indicate that they want the father involved in raising their child.

**Figure 2: Romantic Involvement of Unmarried Parents**



**Source: Authors' tabulations of data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study ( $n=3,712$  unmarried mothers at the time of a new child's birth).**

Although new parents may have positive expectations for their future, another major finding from the Fragile Families Study is that many parents lack the skills and capabilities necessary for a stable family life. Some 37% of mothers and 34% of fathers lack a high-school degree; only 4% of mothers and fathers have a college degree. During the week before the child's

birth, 19% of fathers were “idle” (neither working nor in school), and 39% of mothers received income from welfare at some time in the past year. These figures underscore the precarious socioeconomic circumstances and the barriers to long-term family stability that many of these unmarried parents face. Thus, while the birth of a child may represent a “magic moment” of high attachment and expectations among unmarried couples, many face an uncertain future.

Specifically for children, involvement by their fathers may attenuate over time, depriving them of an important and irreplaceable resource. Information about long-term father involvement is not yet available from the Fragile Families Study, but other research has shown that fathers who do not live with their children and who never married the child’s mother have lower involvement than divorced fathers, and that father-child contact typically diminishes with time since the parents’ separation.<sup>27</sup> For both of these reasons, children in fragile families whose parents separate are likely to be particularly at risk of growing apart from their fathers over time.

### **Fathers as Resources for Children**

The consequences for children of not having a father have been a source of longstanding concern, but the focus of research on fathers has evolved as the larger cultural meaning of fatherhood has changed over time. Only in the last several decades have scholars begun to examine father involvement more broadly. Early studies focused on the effect of *father absence*, defined as the father’s not living with the child. Using this “deficit model,” children in mother-only (“father-absent”) families were compared to children in two-parent (“father-present”) families without directly measuring what fathers—whether living with their children or not—were actually contributing to their children’s lives. As noted earlier, research shows that children in single-parent families experience greater adverse outcomes compared to their counterparts living with

both biological parents, however, most of these studies focus on children of divorced fathers only.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1980s, with the emergence of a “new” fatherhood model (particularly among the middle class) in which there were greater expectations for fathers’ emotional investment and active participation in parenting, studies began to investigate the potential *positive* effects of father involvement on children. The first studies in this area investigated the effects of fathers’ financial support and found that the payment of child support is positively associated with children’s well-being.<sup>29</sup> For example, one Urban Institute study found that \$1,000 in child support dollars was associated with higher grades and fewer school problems among children, and that child support income had a *larger* effect on children’s well-being than an identical amount of ordinary income.<sup>30</sup>

A growing literature in sociology has investigated the effects of fathers’ non-monetary involvement as well, such as participating in shared activities with the child and developing a close, high-quality relationship with the child. Positive father involvement, particularly by fathers who live with their children, has been linked to decreases in behavioral problems among children and adolescents, including delinquency, substance use, anxiety and depression.<sup>31</sup> However, these effects vary in size and significance and are not always shown to be large relative to other important influences on children’s well-being.

The benefits for children of involvement by fathers who are not living in the same household are even less apparent, perhaps because the *quality* of father involvement has not been accurately measured.<sup>32</sup> Most studies of nonresidential father involvement have focused on the quantity (frequency) of father-child contact, and little if any beneficial effect for children has been found of frequent interaction with fathers.<sup>33</sup> Yet, the quality of the relationship inherently reflects the strength of the affective bond between father and child, and feeling loved and cared for by parents increases children’s emotional security, sense of worth, and self-confidence which

facilitate children's positive development.<sup>34</sup> Given the evidence in psychological research that fathers *can* positively affect child development,<sup>35</sup> the lack of clear findings in other social science literature underscores the fact that the quantity of father involvement may be far less important for a child's well-being than the quality.<sup>36</sup> A recent meta-analysis that used more nuanced measures of involvement by nonresidential fathers—such as father-child closeness and father's authoritative parenting—found evidence that increased father involvement produced significant gains in children's academic achievement and reductions in behavioral problems.<sup>37</sup> Future research using more refined measures of high-quality father involvement is likely to corroborate these results.

Not surprisingly, fathers who do not live with their children see their children less often, which decreases the likelihood that the father and child will develop a close relationship.<sup>38</sup> Also, fathers who do not share the child's household are less likely to contribute financial resources to support their child, since they have less ability to monitor the allocation of resources (by the mother) than a father living in the same household.<sup>39</sup> Particularly following divorce, absent fathers may become less altruistic toward their children over time.<sup>40</sup> Parents also may be less able to reinforce one another in childrearing following divorce, further diminishing the father's role.<sup>41</sup> Although these findings refer to formerly-married couples, the consequences are likely similar for unmarried couples following a separation.

Despite the potential financial and emotional benefits of father involvement, some have questioned whether father involvement—or involvement by some subset of fathers—may in fact be detrimental for children and their mothers insofar as some fathers are prone to violence or have mental health or substance abuse problems.<sup>42</sup> Recent research has documented that approximately 15% of women on welfare in one city report being severely physically abused by a husband or partner in the last year,<sup>43</sup> a rate that is comparable to the rates reported in other studies of welfare recipients.<sup>44</sup> About 4% of new mothers in the Fragile Families study reported that the father

“sometimes” or “often” hit or slapped them within the last month (or the last month they were together, for couples no longer romantically involved). This figure is somewhat lower than the other studies of welfare mothers, but violence is likely lower in the month preceding a child’s birth. Also, the mothers in the Fragile Families sample are somewhat more advantaged economically than a sample of mothers on welfare, and the risk of violence toward women is higher among low-income families.<sup>45</sup>

Domestic violence is a very serious problem for the children and mothers who experience such abuse, and violent behavior may be under-reported in surveys. Nevertheless, most fathers are not violent or potentially dangerous, and for most children, greater father involvement likely offers an important resource. The challenge is to devise programs that effectively encourage positive father involvement, but that include adequate safeguards for the minority of children who may be at risk.

### **Policies Designed to Promote Father Involvement**

As family demography and the social environment have changed, public policy also has evolved in an attempt to redress the consequences of family instability and sometimes to re-shape the demographic trends themselves. Most recently, the 1996 federal welfare reform law (PRWORA) added new emphasis to programmatic interventions with respect to father involvement in two primary categories: 1) programs designed to discourage nonmarital fertility and, thus, decrease the formation of “father-absent” families, and 2) programs intended to ameliorate the consequences of single-parent families by increasing fathers’ support for and involvement with their children.

## **Programs to Discourage the Formation of Father-Absent Families**

Efforts to reduce the rising number of father-absent families have focused primarily on preventing unwanted pregnancy among unmarried women, especially teenage girls. This approach is guided by awareness that when a pregnancy is unintended, the father is less likely to live with the child and provide “positive parenting.”<sup>46</sup> In contrast, when a pregnancy is intended and births are spaced appropriately, better maternal and child health outcomes are likely to result, and there is greater assurance that the child will be loved and nurtured by both the mother and the father. Most births to unmarried couples, however, are unintended. Of births that occurred to never-married women in 1994, 58% were the result of unintended pregnancies.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, reducing the incidence of unintended pregnancy among unmarried couples represents a promising strategy to reduce the likelihood that a child will grow up without a father’s involvement in his or her life. Pregnancy prevention efforts fall into three main categories: family planning, teen programs, and family caps.

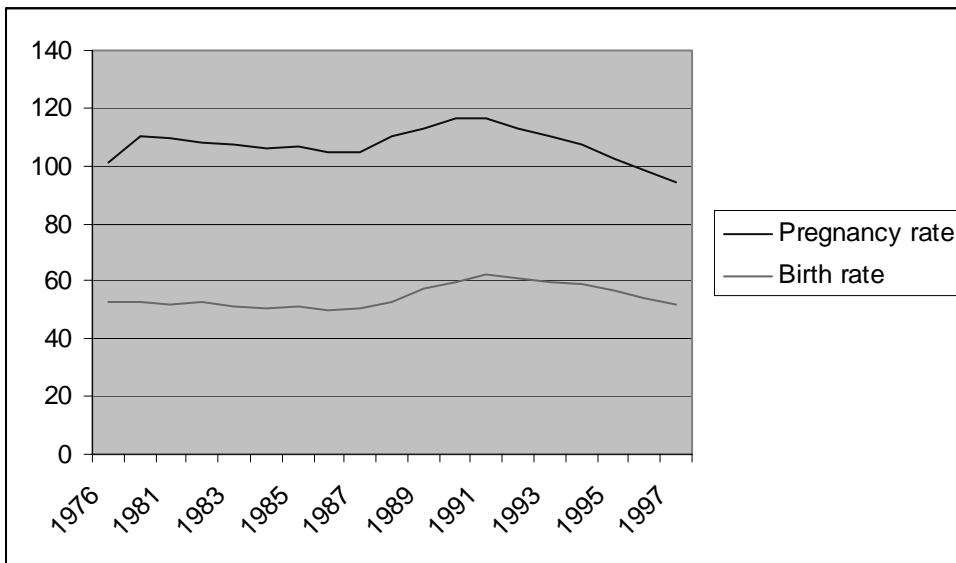
**Family planning.** Federal family planning funding (particularly through Title X of the Public Health Service Act) has been used to provide contraceptives to low-income women in hospitals, community-based clinics and health centers, and private organizations such as Planned Parenthood. The impact of federal family planning programs has not been unambiguously documented, in part because most studies are complicated by methodological problems such as failure to control for levels of sexual activity or to account for the increasing availability of contraception (such as condoms) outside of family planning clinics.<sup>48</sup> Yet, there is some evidence that family planning programs have reduced nonmarital pregnancies and/or birth rates and that they are cost-effective because they reduce medical expenses that would have otherwise been incurred.<sup>49</sup>

**Teen programs.** Many of the efforts to reduce nonmarital childbearing have focused on teenagers, even though births to women under age 20 account for less than one third of all births outside of marriage.<sup>50</sup> However, 35% of births to unmarried women over age 20 were preceded by a teenage birth, and teen births account for 49% of all *first* births that occur outside of marriage.<sup>51</sup> Further, teen childbearing is associated with a high probability of receiving welfare, and the majority of mothers on welfare had their first child as a teenager.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, delaying adolescent pregnancy is an important strategy for improving outcomes for children.

Pregnancy prevention programs for teens have disparate goals—some intend to reduce sexual activity altogether by promoting abstinence, while others intend to encourage “safe” sex by increasing sex education and availability of contraceptives. In addition, a growing number of programs are targeting males with messages about abstinence and statutory rape. Although rigorous evaluation research has not yet proven the effectiveness of either abstinence or education programs,<sup>53</sup> teen pregnancy and birth rates declined in the 1990s (see figure 3), and both abstinence and contraception appear to have contributed to the declines.<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, programs that seek to alter the life opportunities of adolescents, such as early childhood education and youth development programs, appear to hold greater promise than education or service programs alone.<sup>55</sup>

**Figure 3: Teen Pregnancy and Birth Rates (1976-1997)**

(rate per 1,000 women age 15-19)



Source: Ventura, S.J., Mosher, W.D., Curtin, S.C., Abma, J.C., and Henshaw, S. *Trends in pregnancies and pregnancy rates by outcome: Estimates for the United States, 1976-96*. Vital Health Statistics report, series 21, no. 56. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, January 2000, Table 3; and Ventura, S.J., Mosher, W.D., Curtin, S.C., Abma, J.C., Henshaw, S. *Trends in pregnancy rates for the United States, 1976-97: An update*. Vital Health Statistics report, vol. 49, no. 4. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, June 6, 2001, Table 1.

**Family caps.** The family cap (or “child exclusion”) policy places a limit on the monthly welfare benefit a mother can receive, regardless of whether she has additional children, based on the economic theory that more generous welfare benefits are likely to increase “illegitimacy” and reduce marriage.<sup>56</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, researchers began to examine whether, in fact, welfare benefits were largely responsible for the rise in births outside of marriage. Charles Murray’s *Losing Ground*, published in 1984, was the most notable treatise in support of this theory.<sup>57</sup> However, empirical research suggests that the effects of welfare benefits on marriage and fertility, when they are found, are relatively small compared with other factors affecting nonmarital

childbearing.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, those who believe welfare provides incentives for nonmarital childbearing expected that implementation of the family cap would decrease childbearing among welfare mothers, and hence reduce the number of children with absent fathers.

Family caps were first implemented through waivers granted to states in the early 1990s, and PRWORA permitted all states to impose a family cap without federal approval. New Jersey was the first state to adopt a family cap in 1992, and as of 1999, 23 states had established some sort of family cap policy.<sup>59</sup> An evaluation of the New Jersey program in 1998 used an experimental design—the most rigorous test of program effects—and showed that births outside of marriage were significantly lower among the experimental group compared to the control group, but only among new welfare cases. The decline in birth rates was accompanied by an initial rise in abortions that subsequently dissipated.<sup>60</sup> Yet, in Arkansas—the only other state to evaluate their family cap program using an experimental design—no statistically significant effect of the family cap was noted for nonmarital births.<sup>61</sup>

Overall, while pregnancy prevention programs have met with some success, they have not fundamentally abated the upward trend in nonmarital fertility and, hence, the formation of father-absent families. This is because nonmarital fertility has risen for reasons that reflect larger cultural shifts in attitudes, values and practices related to family formation—not simply because couples lack information about sex or access to contraceptive technology. As described in the section on demographic trends, consensual unions other than marriage have become more accepted and prevalent, increasing the likelihood that children will be born outside of marriage.

### **Programs to Encourage Greater Father Involvement**

Because “father absence” is the defining characteristic of single-parent families, public policy has attempted to compensate for the resources children lose when the father is not in the

household. The most obvious resource deficit for single-parent families is economic—without the fathers’ income, female-headed families are much more likely to be poor. Initially, policies were designed simply to compensate for the loss of the father’s income directly with government cash assistance and in-kind benefits such as food stamps and Medicaid. Then, as the composition of single mothers changed from widows to separated and divorced women, policymakers began to consider getting resources from fathers to assist the single-parent families to whom they were at one time attached. Programs were initiated to collect child support from unmarried fathers, and later, to increase their earnings to enable them to pay support. Only recently has policy attention to fathers broadened beyond financial support to incorporate non-monetary investments in children as well.

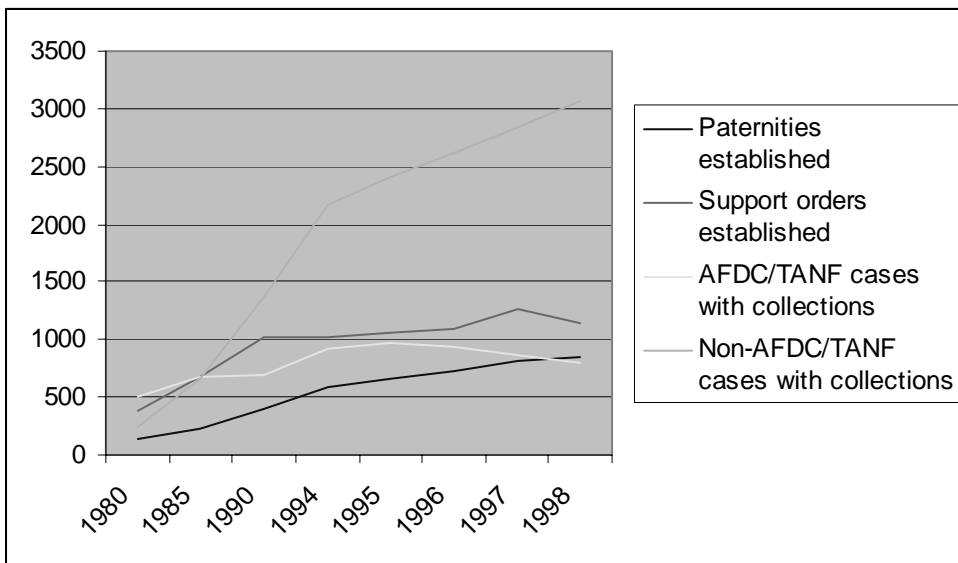
**Child support enforcement.** The first program that could be considered a fatherhood program is the federal child support enforcement (CSE) system. Beginning in 1975, federal matching funds were provided to states to establish paternity and support awards, and to collect child support payments on behalf of single-parent families. The program was initially designed to recoup money from noncustodial fathers to offset welfare expenditures in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, but in 1980, the program was broadened to serve all children eligible for support regardless of income or welfare status. From its inception, the CSE system was charged solely with enforcing fathers’ financial support of their children, while other aspects of fathers’ involvement, including visitation and custody, were (and remain) governed by state laws.

Also from the beginning, the CSE system focused on unmarried fathers as its primary targets, since these men are the most likely to have children on welfare.<sup>62</sup> Legislative reforms in the last two decades, most recently PRWORA, have significantly strengthened the overall effectiveness of the CSE system (see figure 4). Paternity establishment—a prerequisite to the

formal establishment of child support—has increased dramatically for nonmarital births during the past two decades, from 19% in 1979 to 52% in 1996.<sup>63</sup> In addition, use of increasingly aggressive enforcement tools, such as universal wage withholding, revocation of driving, recreational and professional licenses, and interception of tax refunds, has increased payments dramatically. Child support collections facilitated by CSE more than doubled (in nominal dollars) between 1990 and 1998, from \$6.0 billion to \$14.3 billion.<sup>64</sup> Still, it should be noted that child support is collected for only a relatively small percentage of families being served by the CSE system. Collections were made on behalf of only 14% of TANF families, and 28% of non-TANF families, during 1998.<sup>65</sup>

**Figure 4: Increased Child Support Enforcement Efforts (1980-1998)**

(in thousands)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2000* (120<sup>th</sup> edition). Washington, DC: Hoover's Business Press, 2000. Table no. 632.

Policymakers have largely assumed that fathers fail to pay child support because they do not want to pay (so-called “deadbeat dads”) and not because they are unable to pay.<sup>66</sup> But research indicates that, although most noncustodial fathers can afford to pay more child support, many fathers are poor and unable to support their children.<sup>67</sup> These are typically the fathers of children on welfare, and little is known about these men beyond the fact that they are often unemployed or underemployed and have few resources.<sup>68</sup> While recognizing that wide variation exists in the situations of fathers living apart from their children, recent analyses have found that as a group, nonresident fathers are more likely than resident fathers to be young, to have less than high school education, to be in poor health, to have had some involvement with the criminal justice system, and to have lower hourly wages and fewer work hours per week.<sup>69</sup>

Rising paternity establishment rates, child support orders and collections signal that the child support enforcement system is increasingly successful at its primary objective—ensuring that noncustodial fathers provide economic support to their children. But for children on welfare, the benefits of an effective child support enforcement system are minimal for several reasons. First, child support that is collected on behalf of welfare families goes to repay welfare expenditures and not to increase family income.<sup>70</sup> (See article by Greenfield, et al., in this journal issue.) Because of this policy, fathers have little incentive to pay their obligations, since their children are not economically better off as a result.<sup>71</sup> In addition, to receive welfare benefits, mothers are required to provide information used to locate the father, which can lead to conflict and tension between parents. Further, many states have minimum baseline amounts for child support orders on the assumption that fathers work full-time, regardless of actual employment status. As a result, low-income fathers may be forced to pay a much higher proportion of their income in child support than middle-income fathers.<sup>72</sup> Finally, child support orders are not routinely adjusted for changes

in the father's income, which can lead fathers to accumulate large arrearages that, according to federal law, cannot be forgiven or adjusted in most cases.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to increasing fathers' financial contributions, child support enforcement policy may affect family formation behavior and how fathers relate to their children. Strong child support enforcement may provide incentives for fathers to avoid having children outside of marriage by increasing the costs of living apart from their children. Research indicates that child support enforcement has reduced nonmarital childbearing<sup>74</sup> and has reduced the likelihood of marital dissolution.<sup>75</sup> Also, some evidence indicates that requiring fathers to pay child support increases their involvement with their children.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, it is important to note that if CSE programs are "successful" in stimulating fathers' support and involvement to adequately offset the detriments of single parenthood, the incentives increase for mothers to form a single-mother family rather than to marry.

**Noncustodial parent work programs.** Recognizing that some low-income fathers are not able to meet their child support obligations, several demonstration projects were undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s to improve fathers' labor market outcomes. The primary demonstration in this area was Parents' Fair Share (PFS), a program administered in seven sites around the country to increase low-income noncustodial parents' employment, earnings and ability to pay child support.<sup>77</sup> The PFS program drew its clientele from fathers who were unemployed or in a low-wage job and had fallen behind in their child support payments. Most of the fathers in the program had been divorced and were disconnected from their children.

An evaluation of the PFS program revealed the difficulty and complexity of improving labor market outcomes for low-income men, and the fact that child support and welfare programs are not equipped to adequately meet the needs of poor fathers. The program relied on judges to order fathers to enroll in PFS or go to jail; thus, these men were not necessarily motivated to

participate in the program because of their desire to be better fathers to their children.

Nonetheless, although their relationships with their children varied dramatically, most fathers expressed a deep desire to be involved in their children's lives.<sup>78</sup> While PFS did not, on average, increase the frequency of noncustodial fathers' visits with their children, some increases in visitation were noted in sites with particularly low initial levels of father-child contact.<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, the frequency of contact between fathers and the custodial mothers varied widely, with nearly three-quarters of mothers reporting that the father had no involvement in decisions about the child. Again, the PFS program was found to have no effect on the frequency that parents interacted; a slight increase was noted, however, in the proportion of parents who reported frequent conflict.<sup>80</sup> Although these findings are discouraging, the implementation and evaluation of the Parents' Fair Share program has highlighted the multiple challenges of supporting low-income fathers and families, and the need to develop new program models.

In 1997, Congress created the "Welfare-to-Work" program to support state and community efforts to help welfare recipients and noncustodial parents move into unsubsidized jobs.<sup>81</sup> Nearly \$2 billion in grant funds were awarded in 1998 and 1999 under this program to assist hard-to-employ welfare recipients and noncustodial fathers who are unemployed, underemployed, or having difficulty making child support payments.<sup>82</sup> An interim report from the contracted evaluator for this new federal program noted that Welfare-to-Work initiatives are seriously attempting to reach and serve noncustodial parents, and that the state and local staff working on these projects say the grants have encouraged a more serious focus on fathers.<sup>83</sup>

**New fatherhood programs.** Until very recently, poor noncustodial fathers on welfare were largely ignored by social policymakers and disconnected from resources that might foster greater involvement in their children's lives.<sup>84</sup> The child support system has operated solely as an *enforcement* agency collecting money from fathers (and punishing fathers who fail to pay) rather

than as a social service organization attempting to balance responsibility with appropriate services and supports (and providing incentives to pay). This is now changing: the confluence of demographic changes that have increased the number of fragile families, growing awareness of the difficulties faced by low-income fathers and families, along with greater understanding about the benefits to children of father involvement, has led to the development of programs to more effectively promote fathers' financial and emotional involvement with their children.

Representing an important first step toward developing public policy that more effectively meets the needs of low-income fathers and families, in March 2000 the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services approved ten state demonstration projects to “improve the opportunities of young, unmarried fathers to support their children both financially and emotionally.”<sup>85</sup> These new programs serve both divorced fathers and new fathers in fragile families. They have varied emphases, but they generally have been designed to improve fathers' parenting skills and their employment capabilities and to ensure that fathers have access to their children. Initial assessments of these new programs have found that enrolling fathers and sustaining their participation over time present particular challenges. More rigorous evaluations have yet to determine the nature and magnitude of the impacts across various program types.

Meanwhile, data from the Fragile Families Study provide some indication of what may be needed to promote the success of fatherhood programs among unmarried parents who have both high hopes for their future together along with low capabilities and resources. Findings from this study support the current direction of public policy concerning father involvement, but highlight the importance of careful program design and implementation. Fatherhood programs are more likely to make a difference *if* they are targeted on the right men and *if* they are timed correctly. Practitioners who run employment programs for disadvantaged men say that motivation has an important effect on whether the program will “work” or not. Fathers are most likely to be highly

motivated and to take advantage of the services that fatherhood programs may provide around the time of a new child's birth when they are (typically) romantically involved with the baby's mother. Thus, fatherhood programs that begin early—in the hospital if possible—are more likely to be successful than programs that target fathers after the relationship with the mother has ended. Also, programs that treat fathers not only as individuals (recognizing their personal strengths, limitations and needs) but also as part of families (recognizing their familial commitments, responsibilities and supports) have a greater chance at success. Finally, programs that address multiple needs faced by both mothers and fathers (such as expanding labor market skills and capabilities, developing parenting and relationship skills, and overcoming substance abuse or mental health problems) across multiple family circumstances (married or unmarried, living together or living apart) hold the greatest promise.

### **Conclusion**

This article has highlighted the changing composition of families in the United States, particularly the fact that many children will spend some time living away from their father during childhood. Because fathers offer important financial and emotional resources to children, it is important to encourage greater father involvement, especially among fathers who do not live with their children. Recent trends and concern for such children have stimulated a variety of new public policies and programs to promote fathers' involvement with their children, both financially and emotionally.

Public policy, supported by sound research, can improve the likelihood that fathers will be involved with their children, both by decreasing the formation of father-absent families in the first place, and by increasing the incentives and supports for positive father involvement. For example, programs to reduce the rising number of father-absent families by focusing on preventing

unwanted pregnancies, especially among teens, appear to be most successful when they seek to alter adolescents' life opportunities in addition to providing family planning education or services. Also, although early programmatic efforts to encourage father involvement yielded disappointing results, newer programs that are better targeted and timed to the birth of a child appear to hold the greatest promise for improving the circumstances of low-income fathers and families.

In addition, a failure to examine a wide diversity of family arrangements undermines the capacity of research to contribute to public policy. Despite a burgeoning literature on the effects of father involvement for children generally, the fathers of children born outside of marriage (particularly co-residential but unmarried fathers) have been largely unexamined. Most of the existing research on fathers living apart from their children has focused on divorced fathers (who are often middle class) and whether or how they remain involved in their children's lives subsequent to the divorce. Given the growing diversity of families, particularly families initiated by a birth outside of marriage, this represents a striking shortcoming in the literature. New directions in research as well as public policies are needed to encourage greater father involvement across the wide diversity of family arrangements that exist in society today.

*The authors wish to thank Margie K. Shields (Issue Editor), Kristin A. Moore (Issue Editorial Advisor), and Sandra Hofferth for very helpful comments, and Cary Bodenheimer and Regina Leidy for assistance with manuscript preparation.*

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- <sup>13</sup> Also, children could live with their fathers (and away from their mothers) in comparable situations. The number of single-father families has risen in recent years, although single-mother families still represent four-fifths of all one-parent families with children (as of 1998). See U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Household and family characteristics: March 1998 (update)*, and earlier reports. Current Population Reports, P20-515. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census, December 11, 1998. Available online at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html>.
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- <sup>64</sup> See note no. --, *2000 green book*, 2001, p. 467.
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