Welfare Reform, Fertility, and Father Involvement

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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 designed to decrease childbearing outside of marriage and to promote two-parent families. This article focuses on the important role that fathers play in children's lives and how public policies have affected childbearing and father involvement. Key observations are:

- Compared with children living with both biological parents, children in father-absent families often have fewer economic and socioemotional resources from their parents, and do not fare as well on many outcome measures.
- 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; those programs seeking to alter adolescents' life opportunities in addition to providing education or family planning services appear to hold the most promise.
- 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 targeting fathers at the time of a child's birth.

Many children spend some time living away from their fathers, deprived of the financial and emotional resources they 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 in society today.

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The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 represented a historic shift in U.S. policy toward poor families and children.[1] 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 have largely excluded fathers, except with respect to their frequent failure to pay child support. Despite rising concerns since the 1980s about the negative consequences of out-of-wedlock childbearing and single-parenthood (particularly for children, but also for society), most policy and research about families on welfare have focused only on single mothers. However, recent research on fatherhood has pointed to the range of contributions that fathers can make in their children's lives,[2] as well as to the barriers that some fathers face in 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 welfare policy may affect father involvement. The first section reviews demographic trends affecting low-income families and outlines the evidence concerning the effects of father involvement on fertility and child well-being. Policies aimed at decreasing nonmarital fertility and increasing father involvement are described, along with suggestions for ways that 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 twentieth century have affected the composition of families in the United States, 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.

Rising Number of Nontraditional Families

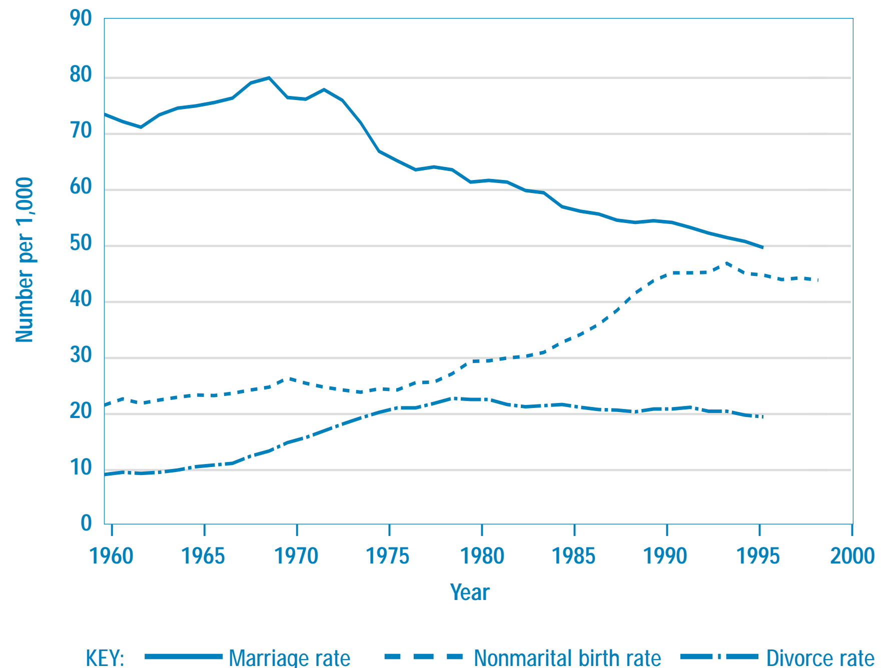
Fewer children today spend their entire childhood in homes with two married parents than children did in the middle of the twentieth century. A major trend contributing to changes in family composition is the overall decline in marriage rates. This decline is driven by a combination of factors: people waiting longer to get married the first time; not marrying at all; or not remarrying after 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.[3] Meanwhile, the rate of marriage among unmarried women declined from 73.5 per 1,000 in 1960 to 49.7 in 1996.[4]

At the same time, the decline in the marriage rate has 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.[5] 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%.[6] For some couples, cohabitation may serve as a precursor to marriage, whereas for others—particularly for 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.[7,8]

The second major trend affecting American families is the increase in marital instability. Divorce rates more than doubled during the last half of the twentieth century, increasing from 9.2 to 22.8 divorces per 1,000 married women (age 15 years and older) between 1960 and 1979.[4] Over half of all marriages begun in the 1980s were projected to end in divorce.[9] 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 1996, the divorce rate was still 19.5 divorces per 1,000 married women.

Figure 1

Marriage, Divorce, and Nonmarital Birth Rates



Sources: 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, p. 9, table 1; 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, p. 7, table 1; 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, p. 17, table 1; U.S. Census Bureau. *Statistical abstract of the United States, 2000: The national data book.* Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, table 144.

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

The third trend is the increased proportion of births occurring outside of marriage. Between 1960 and 1999, nonmarital births as a proportion of all births rose from 5% to 33%.[10] This trend 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 young women ages 15 to 19 also have risen steadily since 1940, as a proportion of all nonmarital births, teen births have actually declined. They 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).[11]

Taken together, these demographic trends have increased the likelihood that, before reaching adulthood, children will live apart from at least one of their biological parents (usually the father). This could occur within multiple family contexts: The child could live alone with the mother, with the mother and her new cohabiting partner, or with the mother and a stepfather.[12] 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.[13] 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.[14]

The overall rise in the number of single-parent families concerns 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 occur rather frequently outside of marriage, yielding a range of complex and diverse family arrangements.

The composition 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, the proportion of never-married single mothers had grown to 46%.[15] In addition, rising cohabitation rates portend that living arrangements may serve as a more important criterion than marital status for determining family structure.[14] According to one estimate, 15% of families classified as "single-mother" families by marital status in 1987 included a cohabiting male.[16] Also, 41% of all nonmarital births in the early 1990s occurred to cohabiting couples.[6] Such statistics imply that many "single" mothers are not rearing their children alone and that the family history and current circumstances of unmarried mothers and their children vary greatly, calling into question the extent to which such families can be appropriately characterized as "father-absent."

In combination, these trends suggest the emergence of a new family type—the "fragile family," comprised of unmarried parents who are working together to raise their children either by cohabiting or maintaining frequent contact.[17] 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.[18]

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.[19] Although the mechanisms by which family structure affects children's well-being have not been fully determined, it is clear that children in female-headed families are often deprived of two types of resources that a

Box 1

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study was designed by researchers at Princeton University and Columbia University using 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 20 U.S. cities with populations over 200,000. New mothers are interviewed in person at the hospital within 48 hours of giving birth, and fathers are interviewed in person either at the hospital or 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 20 cities were completed in the fall of 2000 and show that 41% of the unmarried mothers in the study had incomes below poverty level, and 39% were receiving welfare. The 12-month follow-up survey was expected to be completed by the end of 2001.

For more information, see the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study Web site at http://crcw.princeton.edu/fragilefamilies.

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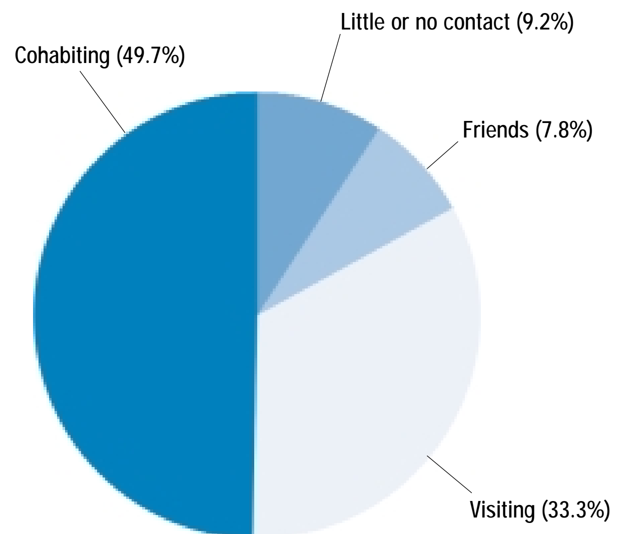
father might provide—economic and socioemotional. The economic consequences can be quantified most easily: Families with no male present are much more likely to be poor, with adverse effects on child development and well-being.[20] In 1998, for example, the poverty rate for female-headed families with children was 39.2%, compared with 7.8% for male-present families with children.[21] Children in female-headed families are also disadvantaged because they are less likely to have highly involved fathers who provide attention and emotional support. Nonresident fathers see their children less often than residential fathers do, and lack of interaction makes it less likely that a father and child will develop a close relationship.[22,23] As described further in the next section, a father's participation in his child's life—both financially and emotionally—offers important benefits.

Academic publications and the popular press have both focused significant attention 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 analyses highlighted the dearth of firsthand information about low-income men and their families, and showed that national survey data—the resource social scientists use most frequently to study individuals and families—seriously underrepresented fathers who do not live with their children.[24] As a result, information on the characteristics of "fragile families" is relatively new and 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 their children (see Box 1).

Data from the baseline interviews in the Fragile Families Study reveal 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 baby—around the time of the child's birth. More than 80% of mothers reported that they were romantically involved with the baby's father at the time the baby was born (see Figure 2). Most fathers were involved during the pregnancy and around the time of birth: More than three-fourths helped the mother during the pregnancy, and/or visited the mother in the hospital. Also, nearly all (99%) of the fathers in the study expressed a desire to be involved in raising their child(ren), and 93% of mothers said 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 indicated that they want the father involved in raising their child.

Figure 2

Romantic Involvement of Unmarried Parents



Source: Data tabulated from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, based on a sample of 3,712 unmarried mothers at the time of a new child's birth.

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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 in the study lacked a high school degree, and only 4% of mothers and fathers had 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 had 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, though the birth of a child may represent a "magic moment" of high attachment and expectations for unmarried couples, many grapple with an uncertain future. The fathers' involvement may attenuate over time, depriving their children of an important and irreplaceable resource. Information about fathers' long-term 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 after unmarried parents separate.[23] For these reasons, children in fragile families whose parents separate are likely to be at higher risk of growing apart from their fathers over time.

Fathers as Resources for Children

The consequences of not having a father have been a source of long-standing concern to society, 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 effects of *father absence*, defined as the father not living with the child. In this "deficit model," children in mother-only (or "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 with their counterparts who live with both biological parents; however, most of these studies focus on children of divorced fathers only.[19]

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. The first studies in this area focused on fathers' financial support and found that the payment of child support is positively associated with children's well-being.[25] For example, one Urban Institute study found that $1,000 in child support 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.[26]

A growing literature in sociology and child development has investigated the effects of fathers' nonmonetary involvement as well, such as participating in shared

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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 less-frequent child and adolescent behavioral problems, including delinquency, substance use, anxiety, and depression.[27] However, these effects vary in size and significance and are not always 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.[28] Most studies of nonresident father involvement have focused on the quantity (frequency) of father–child contact, and frequent interaction with fathers has been found to have little if any beneficial effect for children.[29] 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 positive development.[28] Given the evidence in psychological research that fathers *can* positively affect child development,[30] 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 of involvement.[31] A recent meta-analysis that used more nuanced measures of nonresidential father involvement—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.[28] 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 them less often, which decreases the likelihood that the father and child will develop a close relationship.[23,32] Also, fathers who do not share the child's household are less likely to contribute financial resources to support their child, as they have less ability than a father living with the child has to monitor the allocation of resources by the mother.[33] Particularly following divorce, absent fathers may become less altruistic toward their children over time.[34] Divorced parents also may be less able to reinforce one another in child rearing, further diminishing the father's role.[35] 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 in general, father involvement may, in fact, be detrimental for children and their mothers in those instances when the father is prone to violence or has mental health or substance abuse problems.[36] Recent research shows that approximately 15% of women on welfare in one city reported being severely physically abused by a husband or partner in the last year,[37] a rate that is comparable to rates reported in other studies of welfare recipients.[38] 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 percentage is somewhat lower than those reported in 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 economically advantaged than a sample of mothers on welfare, and the risk of violence toward women is lower among families with more income.[39]

Domestic violence is a very serious problem for the children and mothers affected by it, and violent behavior may be underreported in surveys. Nevertheless, most fathers are not violent or potentially dangerous, and for most children, greater father involvement likely offers important benefits. The challenge is to devise programs that encourage positive father involvement, but that include adequate safeguards for the minority of children and mothers who may be at risk.

Though pregnancy prevention programs have met with some success, they have not fundamentally abated the high levels of nonmarital fertility and the formation of father-absent families.

Policies Designed to Promote Father Involvement

As family demographics and the social environment have changed, public policy also has evolved in an attempt to mitigate the consequences of family instability and, in some cases, to reshape the demographic trends themselves. Most recently, the 1996 federal welfare reform law gave new emphasis to two primary categories of programmatic interventions intended to promote father involvement: 1) programs designed to discourage nonmarital fertility and thus decrease the formation of "father-absent" families; and 2) programs intended to increase nonresident 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 the awareness that when a pregnancy is unintended, the father is less likely to live with the child and provide "positive parenting."[40] In contrast, when a pregnancy is intended and births are spaced appropriately, better maternal and child health outcomes are likely, and assurance is greater 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 among never-married women in 1994, 58% were the result of unintended pregnancies.[41] 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 Services 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.[40] 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.[42]

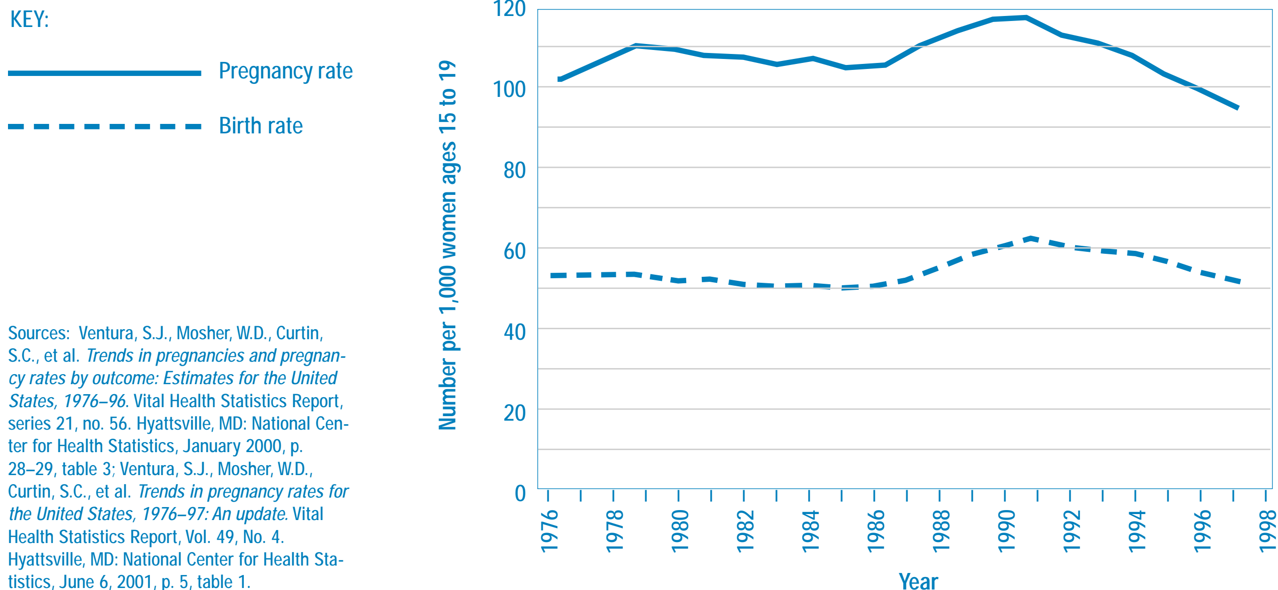
Teen Programs

Many 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.[43] 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 outside of marriage.[44] 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.[45] Therefore, delaying adolescent pregnancy is an important strategy for improving outcomes for children.

Pregnancy prevention programs for teens have disparate goals—some aim to reduce sexual activity altogether by promoting abstinence, whereas others 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 research has not yet proven the effectiveness of either abstinence or education programs,[46] teen pregnancy and birth rates declined in the 1990s (see Figure 3), and both abstinence and contraception appear to have contributed to the declines.[47] Interestingly, programs that seek to alter adolescents' life opportunities, such as early childhood education and youth development programs, appear to hold greater promise than education or service programs alone.[48]

Figure 3

Teen Pregnancy and Birth Rates 1976–1997



Sources: Ventura, S.J., Mosher, W.D., Curtin, S.C., et al. *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, p. 28–29, table 3; Ventura, S.J., Mosher, W.D., Curtin, S.C., et al. *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, p. 5, table 1.

Family Caps

The family cap (or "child exclusion") policy limits the monthly welfare benefit a mother can receive regardless of whether she has additional children, based on the theory that more generous welfare benefits are likely to increase "illegitimacy" and reduce incentives for marriage.[33,34] In the 1970s and 1980s, researchers began to examine whether welfare benefits were, in fact, 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.[49] However, empirical research suggests that welfare's effects on marriage and fertility are relatively small compared with other factors affecting nonmarital childbearing.[50] Nonetheless, those who believe welfare provides incentives for nonmarital childbearing expected that family caps 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 the federal welfare reform law of 1996 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.[51] 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 recipients. The decline in birth rate was accompanied by an initial rise in abortions that subsequently dissipated.[52] However, in Arkansas—the only other state to evaluate its family cap program using an experimental design—no statistically significant impact of the family cap was noted for nonmarital births.[53]

Overall, though pregnancy prevention programs have met with some success, they have not fundamentally abated the high levels of nonmarital fertility and the formation of father-absent families. This is because nonmarital fertility has risen for reasons that reflect

Rising paternity establishment rates, child support orders, and collections signal that the system is increasingly successful ... but for children on welfare, the benefits of an effective CSE system are minimal.

larger cultural shifts in attitudes, values, and practices—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 most single-parent families, public policy has attempted to compensate for the resources that children lose when the father is not in the household. The most obvious resource deficit is economic—without fathers' income, female-headed families are much more likely to be poor. Initially, policies were designed to compensate for the loss of the father's income directly with cash assistance and in-kind benefits such as food stamps and Medicaid. Then, as single mothers increasingly were women who were separated and divorced from their partners, as opposed to being widowed, policymakers began to consider seeking resources from fathers. Programs were initiated to collect child support from unmarried fathers and, more recently, to increase their earnings so that they can pay child support. Only recently has policy attention to fathers broadened beyond financial support to incorporate nonmonetary investments in children as well.

Child Support Enforcement

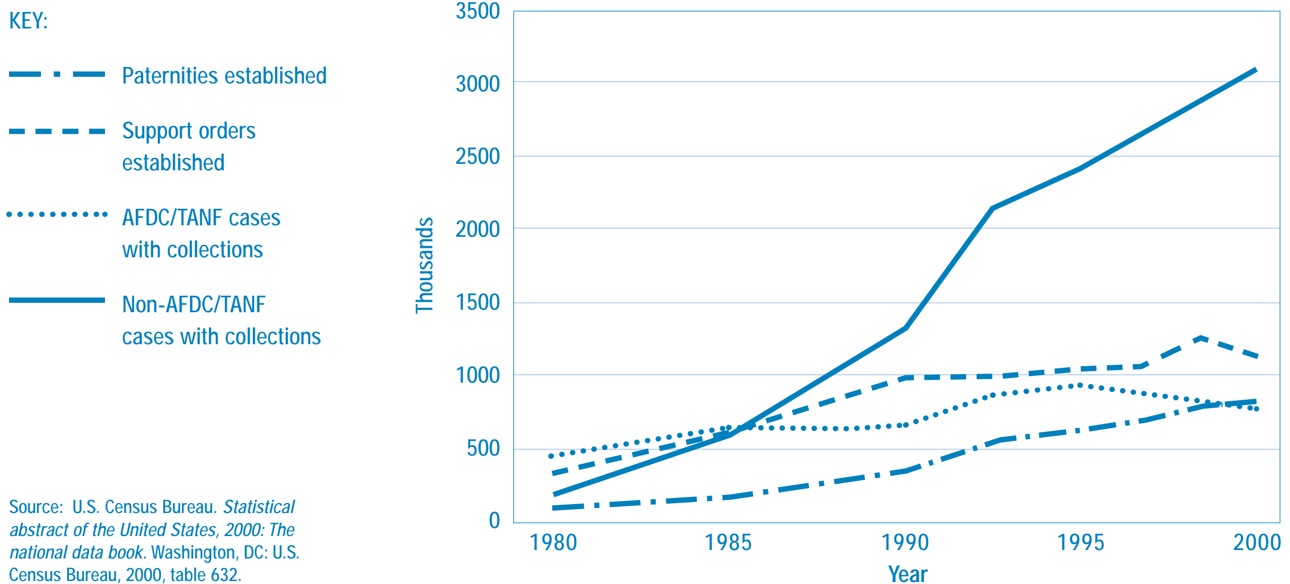
The first program that could be considered a fatherhood program is the federal Child Support Enforcement (CSE) system. Beginning in 1975, federal matching funds were provided to states to establish paternity and support awards and to collect child support payments on behalf of single-parent families. The program was initially designed to recoup money from noncustodial fathers to offset expenditures in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program, but in 1980, CSE was broadened to serve all children eligible for support regardless of family income or welfare status. From its inception, the CSE program 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 never-married fathers because these men are the most likely to have children on welfare.[54] Legislative reforms in the last two decades, and most recently the federal welfare reform law of 1996, have strengthened CSE's overall effectiveness (see Figure 4). During the past two decades, paternity establishment—a prerequisite to the formal establishment of child support—has increased dramatically from 19% of nonmarital births in 1979 to 52% in 1996. In addition, the use of increasingly aggressive enforcement tools, such as universal wage withholding, revocation of driver's, 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.[55] Still, it should be noted that child support is collected for only a relatively small percentage of families served by the CSE system. Collections were made on behalf of only 14% of families on welfare (now Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF) and 28% of nonwelfare families during 1998.[56]

Policymakers have largely assumed that fathers fail to pay child support because they do not want to pay (so-called "deadbeat dads"), not because they are unable to pay.[57] But research indicates that, although most noncustodial fathers can afford to pay more child support, a sizeable number of fathers are poor and unable to support their children.[58] 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.[59] Clearly, the situations of fathers living apart from their children vary widely. Recent analyses have found that as a group, however, nonresident fathers are more like-

Figure 4

Increased Child Support Enforcement Efforts (1980–1998)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau. *Statistical abstract of the United States, 2000: The national data book.* Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, table 632.

ly than resident fathers to be young, to have less than a 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.[60]

Rising paternity establishment rates, child support orders, and collections signal that the CSE 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 CSE system are minimal, for several reasons. First, for the most part, child support collected on behalf of welfare families goes to repay welfare expenditures and not to increase family income.[61] (See the article by Greenberg and colleagues in this journal issue.) Because of this, fathers have little incentive to pay their obligations, as their children are not economically better off as a result.[54] In addition, to receive welfare benefits, mothers must provide information to help locate the father, which can lead to conflict and tension between parents. Further, many states set 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 pay.[62] Finally, child support orders are not routinely adjusted for changes in the father's income, which can lead to fathers accumulating large arrearages that, according to federal law, cannot be forgiven or adjusted in most cases.[63]

In addition to increasing fathers' financial contributions, child support enforcement policy may affect family formation and how fathers relate to their children. By increasing the costs of living apart from their children, strong child support enforcement may encourage fathers to avoid having children outside of marriage. Studies suggest that strong child support enforcement may be linked to reduced nonmarital childbearing[64] and reduced likelihood of marital dissolution.[65] Also, some evidence indicates that requiring fathers to pay child support increases their involvement with their

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children.[66] At the same time, if CSE programs are "successful" in stimulating fathers' support and involvement to an extent that offsets the detriments of single parenthood, the incentives increase for mothers to stay single rather than marry.

Noncustodial Parent Work Programs

In view of the fact 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.[59] The PFS program enrolled fathers who were unemployed or in a low-wage job and had fallen behind in their child support payments. Most 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 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 because of their desire to be better fathers. Nonetheless, although their relationships with their children varied dramatically, most fathers expressed a deep desire to be involved in their children's lives.[67] Although PFS did not, on average, increase the frequency of noncustodial fathers' visits with their children, some increases were noted in sites with particularly low initial levels of father–child contact.

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 of parents' interactions; a slight increase was noted, however, in the proportion of parents who reported frequent conflict. Although these findings are discouraging, the implementation and evaluation of the Parents' Fair Share program have highlighted the mul-

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.

tiple 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.[68] 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.[69] 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.[70]

New Fatherhood Programs

Until very recently, poor noncustodial fathers of children on welfare were largely ignored by social policymakers and disconnected from resources that might help them become more involved in their children's lives.[59] The child support system has operated solely as an enforcement agency collecting money from fathers (and punishing those 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 changing as the confluence of three factors—demographic changes that have increased the number of fragile families; growing awareness of the difficulties faced by low-income fathers and families; and greater understanding of the benefits to children of father involvement—has led to the development of programs that more effectively promote fathers' financial and emotional involvement with their children.

Representing an important first step toward developing such programs, in March 2000 the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services approved 10 state demonstration projects to "improve the opportunities of young, unmarried fathers to support their children both financially and emotionally."[71] These new programs serve both divorced fathers and new fathers in fragile families. They have varied emphases, but they generally are designed to improve fathers' parenting skills and 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 support the current direction of public policy, but highlight the importance of careful program design and implementation. Fatherhood programs are more likely to make a difference if they are targeted to the right men and if they are timed correctly. Practitioners who run employment programs for disadvantaged men say that participants' 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 offered by fatherhood programs around the time of a new child's birth, when the father is likely to be 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 the multiple needs of both mothers and fathers across multiple family circumstances (married or unmarried, living together or living apart) hold the greatest promise. Such needs might include expanding labor market skills and capabilities, developing parenting and relationship skills, and overcoming violence, substance abuse, or mental health problems. (See the appendix following this article for three examples of programs using TANF funds to focus on teen males and fathers.)

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 discouraging the formation of father-absent families in the first place, and by increasing incentives and supports for positive father involvement. For example, programs designed 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 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 greater promise for improving the circumstances of low-income fathers and families.

In addition, 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 coresident but unmarried fathers) have been largely unstudied. Most of the 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 after the divorce. Given the growing diversity of family composition, this represents a striking shortcoming in the literature. New directions in research and public policies are needed to encourage greater father involvement across the wide diversity of family arrangements in society today.

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ENDNOTES

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APPENDIX

Innovative Uses of TANF Funds for Programs for Teen Males and Fathers

These program profiles were prepared by Kate Boyer, Ph.D., senior researcher, and Catherine Lawrence, C.S.W., research associate, of the Rockefeller Institute of Government as part of the Institute's project, "Beyond Symbolic Politics."

Program name: Adolescent Health and Youth Development

State: Georgia

Coverage: 34 counties

Program goals: Improve teen health and skills; reduce teen pregnancy

Service population: Teens age 19 and under

Funding sources: TANF and other state funds

Description: Georgia is spending TANF funds on the Adolescent Health and Youth Development (AHYD) initiative, a comprehensive pregnancy prevention program based on youth development principles. AHYD offers three types of grants to counties: 1) *teen center grants*, for localities to provide comprehensive health services, including contraception, as well as abstinence-based programs and youth development services; 2) *male involvement program grants*, to reduce pregnancy, promote abstinence, and increase young fathers' involvement with their children; and 3) *community involvement grants,* to foster partnerships between organizations and fill gaps in service. For example, the program located at Teen Headquarters, a community center in Bibb County, not only provides a male-only health clinic, it also offers holistic programming related to the many pressures specifically confronting young men, such as gang involvement, drug abuse, and the emotional and physical risks of sexual involvement. Young men in the community have a place to go where they feel they belong, can participate in structured and unstructured recreational time, and find adult and peer support.

Results: AHYD services are reaching thousands of young people. In 1998, AHYD male involvement programs served a little more than 2,000 youths. By fiscal year 2000, that number had climbed to 8,664 adolescents in 13 programs.

For further information: See the program's Web site at http://www.ph.dhr.state.ga.us/programs/adolescent/index.shtml.

Program name: Step-Up Young Father Program

State: Arizona

Coverage: Phoenix

Program goals: Help young, low-income fathers meet their parental responsibilities

Service population: Low-income fathers, age 22 and under

Funding sources: TANF and other state funds

Description: While many new programs are focusing on the importance of fathers in children's lives, the Step-Up program is particularly comprehensive. Counseling and case management services provide the foundation of services for young fathers, but the scope of program activities is much more diverse. This collaborative program works with volunteer mentors, Gateway Community College, and the Phoenix Job Training Partnership, to offer educational services and job training. Other services offered include legal assistance in paternity establishment and services to meet basic needs, such as housing and clothing. Additionally, the city's Parks and Recreation Department sponsors an annual Family Camp event for the young men and their families.

Results: Evaluation results showed improvements in the men's employment at full-time jobs, increases in hourly wages, and greater educational attainments. Other promising results include improved relationships with spouses and children, lower levels of gang involvement, and lower levels of substance abuse.

For further information: See the program's Web site at http://www.ci.phoenix.az.us/YOUTH/stepup.html.

Program name: Wisconsin Works Child Support Demonstration

State: Wisconsin

Coverage: Statewide

Program goals: Increase child support collections from fathers

Service population: TANF families with a nonresident parent

Funding sources: TANF and other state funds

Description: In the fall of 1997, as Wisconsin's new welfare system was taking hold, the state began testing the idea that fathers would be more likely to pay child support if they knew their children would receive all the money. Generally speaking, only about 30% of single mothers nationwide ever receive child support. In an effort to improve that rate, Wisconsin "passes through" every dollar of child support paid by the father directly to the mother receiving welfare. The family not only keeps 100% of the child support but also retains their monthly cash grant at the same level, so there is no "penalty" for these families. Wisconsin is unique among states; many states keep all of the child support fathers pay if their children are receiving cash assistance, or pass through a small amount such as $50, the amount of the required pass-through under the earlier AFDC program.

Results: The program has achieved some success in encouraging fathers to pay child support. When compared to a control group of families still under old AFDC rules, families in the new program received more child support, as much as 50% more, which translates into an additional $1,500 a year. Fathers of children under the new program are more likely to pay support and, on average, are likely to pay more than fathers of children in the control group.

For further information: See Meyer, D.R., and Cancian, M. *W-2 Child Support Demonstration evaluation.* Phase 1: Final report. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Institute for Research on Poverty, April 2001. Available online at http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/irp/csde/phase1-tocs.htm.