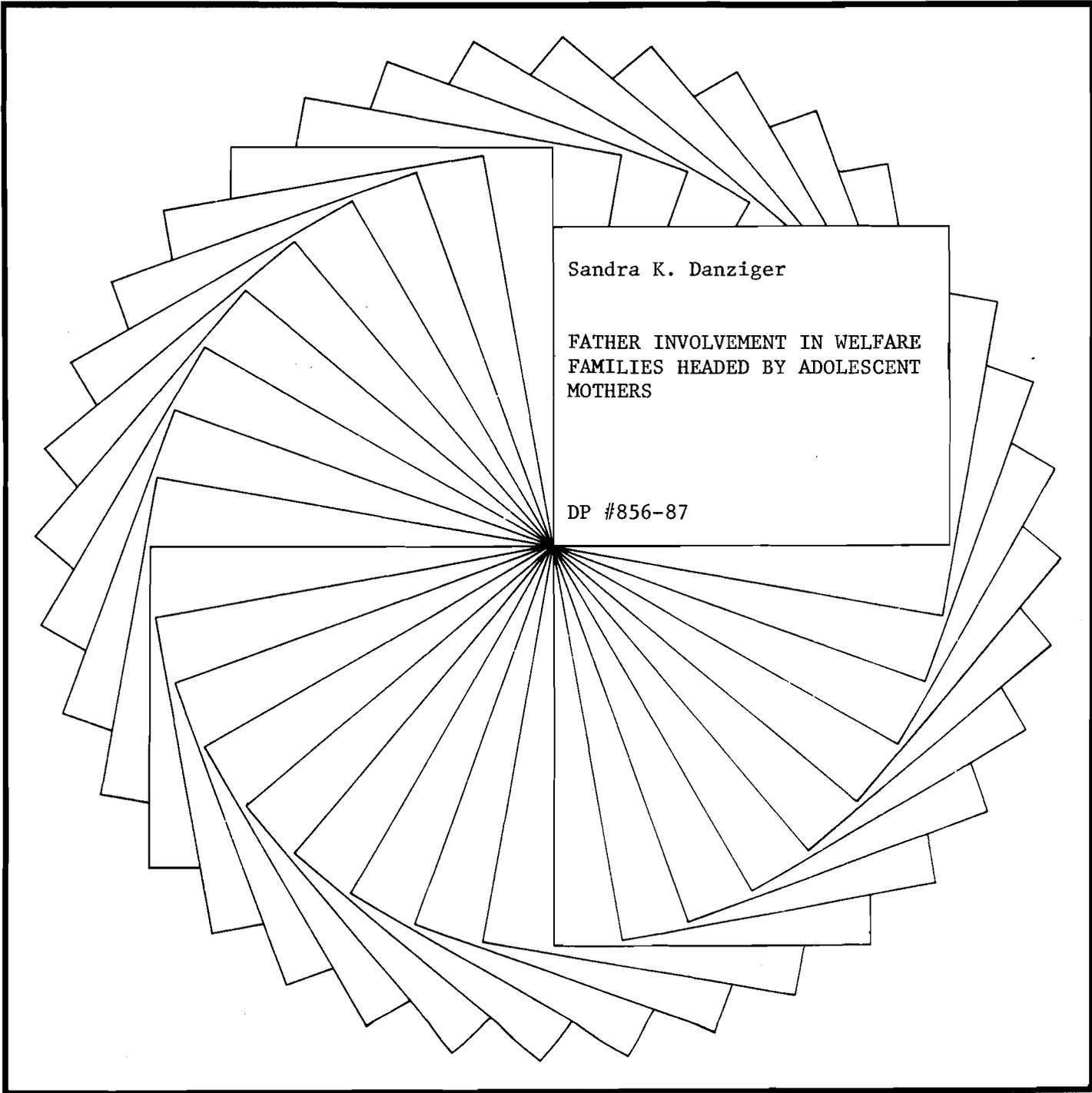




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FATHER INVOLVEMENT IN WELFARE
FAMILIES HEADED BY ADOLESCENT
MOTHERS

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Father Involvement in Welfare Families

Headed by Adolescent Mothers

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Abstract

Using telephone survey data from almost 500 young welfare mothers in Wisconsin, this paper reports the extent to which young fathers are involved both formally and informally with these families. Marital ties, legal paternity identification, court-ordered child support arrangements, and contact maintained by fathers with their children are assessed. The findings indicate, first, a higher degree of father participation in these families than has been traditionally assumed in the social services. Second, few differences are found in the amount of father-child contact of absent fathers who make financial contributions as compared with those who do not. Policy implications are discussed.

Father Involvement in Welfare Families
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INTRODUCTION

Accompanying a major demographic revolution in American family structure and household composition is a growing concern about how to adapt government programs designed to assist families in need. The bipartisan concern over public welfare policy is that these programs should help rather than aggravate the conditions of family life. In the heated debate over the role that welfare assistance has played in the growth of female-headed single parent families, there is one fact on which consensus prevails--for impoverished single mothers with children, public assistance in the form of AFDC benefits (Aid to Families with Dependent Children), Food Stamps, and Medicaid serves as the only available and most reliable source of economic support. Income from both fathers' contributions to children and mothers' employment is often sporadic and not high enough to reduce poverty or alleviate the need for welfare (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1986). Most commonly, welfare reciprocity only ends when marriage occurs. Poverty is much less frequent among two-parent families where two potential earners can share market and child care responsibilities (Danziger and Weinberg, 1986).

In the case of adolescent motherhood, the appropriate role of the male parent has been the subject of much controversy in research, policy, and social services circles. Currently almost one in two births to teens occurs outside of marriage. The increase in out-of-wedlock births has led policymakers to wonder "where the boys are." For example, the Wisconsin legislature in 1985 passed a teen pregnancy options bill. Its

centerpiece, a Grandparent Liability section, required the parents of teen fathers to help share the government's welfare costs for their son's dependents. However, within two years after the law went into effect, only one child support order to grandparents had been issued, and even it had been appealed in the courts. The bill nonetheless reflects the public's desire to stop allowing young men to avoid responsibility.

In the research on teen parenthood, an emphasis on the fathers is emerging. This paper will present evidence on marital ties, legal paternity identification, child support arrangements, and contact maintained between fathers and their children. Most of the previously reported data dramatically points to father absence. For example, adolescent women who bear children are increasingly likely to be unmarried, and those who do marry have less stable marriages than those who delay parenthood (Vinovskis and Chase-Landsdale, 1987). Thus, children born to teen women have very high probabilities of living in single-parent families for very long periods. This period increases if the teen mother did not marry and is nonwhite (Ellwood, 1986).

Associated with fathers' absence are increased chances of long-term poverty and welfare reciprocity (Ellwood, 1986). For example, data from the U.S. Current Population Survey indicate that in 1984 poverty occurred in 32 percent of teen mother households and welfare reciprocity in 30 percent (see also Danziger, 1986). In contrast, poverty characterizes about 1 in 10 of all American families with children. When teen mothers head their own households, their poverty and welfare reciprocity rates are even higher: while less than a third of all single mothers (of all ages) received AFDC, over 80 percent of teenaged single mothers who headed households were welfare-dependent.

Research on male involvement in teen mother families finds little evidence of formal involvement as gauged by marriage rates, residential patterns, and legal paternity and child support arrangements. While about half of babies born to teens in 1982 were born to married women, the degree of involvement of fathers in the other half is not well understood. One of the first articles to describe patterns of fatherhood in adolescent mother families argues that the biological father of the baby may not be the relevant father figure for the child (Gershenson, 1983). In this study of a small sample of white teen mothers in Chicago, as many new boyfriends of the mothers and grandfathers to the children were primary male parent figures for the children as were their biological fathers. Clearly, this reflects a lack of social support from the baby's father.

Estimates of the extent to which absent fathers contribute money to these families are scant (see Lerman, 1987; Parke and Neville, 1987; and Sullivan, 1987). The percentage providing formal child support through the family courts and child support enforcement agencies is very small. The only available estimate of this proportion is one developed for selected jurisdictions in Wisconsin (Danziger and Nichols-Casebolt, forthcoming). In this study, the number of births to unmarried teens in given years is compared with the number of father identifications, paternity adjudications, and child support cases occurring over subsequent years for those children born in the given period.

Table 1 shows the number of cases of unmarried teen mothers over a two-year period (1981-82) and the extent to which fathers were legally identified in the following several years. By 1985, less than 43 percent of the children born in 1981-82 to unwed mothers had legally identified

Table 1

**Births to Unmarried Teens and Percentage with Paternity Actions,
Sample of Selected Wisconsin Counties**

	Number	Percentage of Total Births
Births to unmarried mothers aged 19 or younger, 1981-1982	5724	100.0%
Father identified through marriage, paternity acknowledgment, or paternity court case by 1985	2438	42.6
Those legitimated by 1985 via marriage	161	2.8
Adjudicated paternity cases, with court orders for child support	838	14.6
Acknowledged but without legal financial arrangements	1439	25.2

Source: Danziger and Nichols-Casebolt (forthcoming); data from Wisconsin family court records and Wisconsin Division of Health, Section of Vital Statistics.

fathers (row 2). Since 92 percent of all paternity suits in these jurisdictions occurred before the child reached age 3, very few additional paternities were likely to be established after 1985.

Of those births with a father's names on the birth record, a small number, 161, were legitimated through marriage (row 3). Another 838 had paternity adjudicated through the courts and were required by law to pay some child support (row 4).

If we combine those with formal legal obligations for support through marriage or through court-ordered support after adjudication, only 999 of the 5724 children born to teen single mothers, 17.45 percent, had legal rights to financial support. Of those, only in the case of married parents and just over half of the adjudications did the children actually receive some financial support from their fathers. Even this estimate is probably high compared to the number of those who received adequate support.

The reasons for the lack of formal legal and financial involvement are complex and involve both attitudinal and structural barriers. First, only in recent years have family laws granted a child born outside of marriage the same rights to inheritance and child support as those of a child born in marriage. These legal status changes may not be well understood or adhered to in many sectors of society.

Historically, any child born outside of marriage was afforded very few rights regarding the legal relationship with his/her father. Until the United States Supreme Court intervened in a series of cases in 1968, the "nonmarital" child was often denied rights of paternal support, inheritance, custody, name, and claims under such programs as Workers'

Compensation. In addition, prior to 1968, even if the child was awarded paternal support, some states extended these rights no further than the period of time the child was likely to be unable to support itself, or to a period not exceeding a set number of years (Krause, 1981). With the passage of the 1984 amendments to the federal Child Support Enforcement Act, state paternity laws must now permit the establishment of paternity at least until a child's eighteenth birthday. However, only 23 states have statutory provisions for setting child support amounts for illegitimate children compared to 34 states that have such statutes for divorce or separation proceedings (Melli, 1984).

A second set of barriers involves the lack of tenacity in pursuing father involvement among social services workers who deal with teenaged mothers (Kohn, 1987; Wattenberg, 1987). The result, shown in row 4 of Table 2, is that less than a third of all U.S. births to single women had paternity established in 1984. However, the number of paternities adjudicated each year is increasing faster than is the number of births. As the table shows, by 1984 the number established had grown to almost double the number of 1978.

Despite the economic and social benefits of obtaining paternity and child support, neither is seriously pursued in the majority of unwed births to teens. Instead, according to a Minnesota study, discretionary judgments and practices of agency personnel, widely held assumptions by social workers that the young fathers have very low ability to pay (especially relative to the costs of establishing the case), and strong desires of the mother and/or their families to discontinue relationships

Table 2

Annual Births to Unmarried Women and Numbers of Paternities Established

	1978	1984	Percentage Change, 1978-1984
Paternities established ^a	110,714	219,360	+98.1%
Births to single women aged 19 or less ^b	249,100	270,200	+8.5%
Births to single women of all ages ^c	543,900	770,400	+41.6%
Paternities as a percentage of all unmarried births (row 1/row 3)	20.4%	28.5%	

^aData from Table 12, Background Material and Data on Programs within the Jurisdiction of the Committee on Ways and Means, 1987, U.S. House of Representatives (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1987).

^bData from Table 2.5 in Moore, Simms, and Betsey (1986) and Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1987.

^cData from Vital Statistics of the United States, 1978, vol. 1, Natality, and Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1987.

with the father all contribute to assignment of low priority to paternity determinations (Wattenberg, 1987).

A final element in the lack of paternity and child support suits for this population is the mysterious and almost complete absence of case initiation outside of the public welfare system. Despite the fact that at any given point in time the majority of single teen mothers do not receive AFDC support, perhaps 90 percent of paternity suits are brought on behalf of AFDC cases, i.e., only when program rules mandate an attempt to obtain child support. Wattenberg (1987) concludes that teen mothers are ill-informed of their children's rights and that most avoid any discussion of paternity because they "believe that paternity and child support enforcement procedures are enmeshed in a system that is capricious, arbitrary, and punitive" (p. 12).

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this paper I present preliminary evidence from interviews with teen welfare mothers that can illuminate some of the assumptions that it may not be worthwhile to pursue paternity and child support for these families. Specifically, I examine the extent to which young men are involved both formally and informally in these families. The first question concerns the proportion of cases in which absent-father support has been completely rejected as a feasible option. Next, economic prospects of these fathers and the extent of child support contributions are reported. Third, the patterns of formal and informal involvement over time for teen mother families are assessed by comparing levels of participation at varying ages of the baby. Finally, informal contact in this sample is compared with the extent of formal ties to see whether

legally established absent fathers are more or less likely to maintain relationships with the teen mother and child than those fathers without formal financial arrangements. In conclusion, I discuss how these data bear upon prospects for increasing paternity identification and father involvement among teen mother welfare families.

The Data

As part of a teen parent program evaluation study for the state of Wisconsin, structured telephone interviews were conducted with 494 adolescent mothers who were welfare (AFDC) recipients in 1985 and/or 1986. Of these, 131 were voluntary participants in five pilot programs operating in 10 counties. The other 363 subjects were randomly selected from the AFDC rolls in 7 comparison counties. The data on father involvement are based on 30-45 minute interviews that took place between December 1986 and March 1987. Data were collected on the mother's background characteristics, income and work history, educational status, aspirations, social support, self-esteem, attitudes toward women's roles and use of birth control, role of the baby's father, and exposure to special programs in employability, parenting, counseling and support, career/vocational exploration, etc.

Table 3 provides descriptive statistics on the overall sample in comparison to characteristics of a national teen welfare mother sample. The interview sample is slightly more likely to be married, much less likely to be black and less likely to live in subfamilies with other adults. Other important aspects of the study sample are that 78 percent had only one child, while 22 percent had two or more (one person had 4 children, ten had 3). When there was more than one child, data on father

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Teen Welfare Mother Sample Compared to a National Sample of Teen Mothers Who Received Public Assistance in 1985

	Wisconsin Teen Welfare Mothers, 1986-1987	U.S. Teen Welfare Mothers, 1985 ^a
Total N	494	124,730
Percentage never married	66	74
Percentage married at interview	26	17
Percentage divorced/separated	8 ^b	9
Percentage black	22	54
Percentage living in subfamilies (with other adults)	36	55
Mean years of schooling	11.0	10.4 ^c

^aFrom 1985 Current Population Survey Extract, based on mothers 16-19 years old and receiving public assistance. This number is based on a sample of 381 unweighted observations.

^bThis group includes 2 widowed mothers.

^cThis figure is for the total national sample, including those not receiving AFDC.

involvement focus only on the father of the youngest child. The average age of the women at first birth was 17.8 years, and the average age of the youngest child was 1.6 years at the time of the interview.

Results: Degree of Father Involvement

In terms of the patterns of mother-father relationships, over one-third of the couples were boyfriend-girlfriend, living apart, at the time of the child's birth. Another quarter had already broken up. One-fifth of the couples were married and lived together, while 15 percent lived together but were unmarried. Two percent were divorced or separated at the time the child was born, and less than 1 percent were married but living apart.

By the time of the interview--1.6 years after the child's birth, on average--many of the relationships of the couples had changed. About 43 percent of the young women had broken up with, and were no longer seeing, their child's father. A few more of the couples were then married and living together than at the time of the birth, up from 21 to 23 percent of the sample. The next most frequent relationship was that 19 percent were still in a boyfriend-girlfriend (living apart) relationship. However, the number who had divorced or separated by this time had increased from 2 to almost 7 percent of the couples. Another 6 percent lived together but were unmarried. In sum, less than half, 49 percent, still had a relationship with the child's father.

While the data do not reveal the reasons that so many of the relationships had been severed, there are questions in the survey regarding whether some of the young men might be undesirable fathers. Table 4

Table 4

Teen Mother Welfare Families in Which Father Involvement
May Not Be Feasible or Desirable
N = 494

Reason	Number (Percentage) of Total Cases	
Father is unknown to mother	3	(.6)
Father has died	2	(.4)
Father denies paternity and refuses to pay child support	9	(1.8)
Child support agency has agreed not to pursue paternity for good cause (rape, abuse, disabled, etc.)	2	(.4)
Fathers were not ordered to pay support because they are in jail, unemployed, or too poor	4	(.8)
Mothers have refused to let the father see/visit the child	91	(18.4)

Source: Wisconsin Teen Welfare Mother Study, 1986-1987, Institute for
Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

shows the numbers of young men who in effect were rejected as candidates for family involvement. In approximately 1 percent of the cases, rows 1 and 2, the fathers had died or their identities were not known, according to the mothers. In another 2 percent, the fathers refused to accept the parental obligation, according to the mother. In another 1 percent of the sample, the courts had agreed to not pursue the father's involvement. Thus, in only a total of 4 percent of teen welfare mother cases, or 20 out of 494, was there explicit legal ground for disregarding the man's paternal responsibility.

In those cases in which the court ruled against further pursuit or where the father refused to pay, the mother could conceivably still be involved in a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship with the young man. However, if we examine the mothers' judgments of whether the fathers ought to be involved as a parent, a good many had gone so far as to deny them permission to be with the child. Over 18 percent (bottom row of Table 4) reported that they withheld visitation.

The most common reason given for this refusal (reported in an open-ended question) had to do with an argument or conflict over the couple's relationship. Twenty-six of the young women (5 percent of the sample) refused to let the man see his child because of such conflict. Another 22 refusals (4 percent) were due to the volatile nature of the man: he was reported to be abusive, violent, dangerous, drunk, or on drugs. Another 22 refusals had to do with claims that he was just not a good parent for the child, that she did not want him or his family in the child's life, that he would not provide adequate care. The next most

common reason, given in 19 cases, was that the father was not providing financial support.

In sum, in only a very small proportion of the sample did these families appear to have strong, compelling reasons for the absence of father involvement. When we add up those cases in which fathers were unknown, dead, or denied paternity (14 cases), those the court agreed to disregard (6), and those denied visitation by the mothers for fear of harm or neglect to the child (44 of the refusals), we arrive at a total of 64 out of 494 cases. Approximately 13 percent were judged to be not feasible or fairly undesirable parent figures.

Economic Status and Father Involvement. Thus, the overwhelming majority of young men in these teen mother families may be considered as reasonable candidates for fatherhood. As shown in Table 5, row 1, by the time of the interview 30 percent of the families had resident fathers, either married to or living with the mother. Another 28 percent (rows 2 and 3) had legally established paternity through formal agreements, and in another one-fifth of the families, the mothers were in the process of obtaining legal agreements through the courts at the time of the interview (row 4). The final group of one-fifth had little or no prospects for legal or formal ties (row 5).

Table 5 presents data on economic characteristics of fathers with varying levels of legal and financial involvement. The mean age of the five groups differs very little, varying only between 21.1 and 22.6 years. A similar pattern of slight differences is suggested in the average education at the time of the child's birth, in column 2. The absent fathers who were not paying had on average the lowest level of

Table 5**Economic and Minority Status Differences by Formal Father Involvement**

	Mean Age in Years at Interview (standard deviations)	Highest Grade Completed in Years at Child's Birth (standard deviations)	Percentage (%) of Minority Status ^a	Percentage (%) with Earnings	Percentage (%) Who Worked Full Time in Previous Year
Fathers who are married and/or live with teen mother families N = 148 (30.0%)	22.5 (2.9)	11.3 (1.3)	5.4	62.2	41.2
Absent fathers who pay some child support N = 106 (21.5%)	22.6 (3.9)	11.6 (1.2)	25.5	69.8	59.4
Absent fathers with court orders who do not pay N = 34 (6.9%)	21.2 (2.5)	10.6 (1.7)	41.2	32.3	14.7
Absent fathers with court proceedings in process N = 98 (19.8%)	22.3 (3.6)	11.4 (1.1)	43.9	46.9	49.0
Unidentified fathers; no legal or financial ties N = 108 ^b (21.9%)	21.1 (2.7)	11.3 (1.4)	49.1	34.3	27.8

Source: Wisconsin Teen Welfare Mother Study, 1986-1987, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

^aMinority status is defined by the mother's report of her race: 109 mothers, or 22.1 percent of the sample, were black; 18 (3.6 percent) Hispanic; 1 American Indian; 4 Asian, and 13 were "mixed" or "other." Thus, 70.6 percent of the mothers were non-Hispanic whites.

^bThis includes those few who are dead, unknown, or judged to be undesirable by the courts.

schooling, 10.6 years compared with somewhat more than 11 years for the other groups.

The percentage of the families of minority status, column 3, has a pronounced inverse relationship with level of father involvement: very few nonwhite or Hispanic mothers had the fathers in residence; minority women were also less likely to be receiving child support payments from absent fathers than were whites.

The reported earnings and employment situation of the fathers is given in columns 4 and 5. Employment was low, even though only a few fathers were still enrolled in high school (less than 2 percent). Employment tended to be sporadic; only a minority had worked full time during the previous year. On the other hand, most fathers worked at least part time. In only 16 percent of the cases did the mothers report that in the previous year the father had no employment at all. The proportions of fathers with current earnings and who had held full time jobs in the previous year was highest among absent fathers who were making some child support contributions. The residential fathers ranked second in their level of employment and earnings, although over a third were not receiving income from jobs at the time of the interview. The third highest ranking in terms of income potential were those fathers who were being taken to court. The fathers with legal paternity who were not paying had the lowest economic potential; only about a third of them earned any income.

Thus, while the number of fathers facing economic difficulties was substantial, a sizable number had some ability to pay. Even in the

unidentified father group, over a third had current earnings and over a quarter had been known to work full time.

Does Father Involvement Decline or Increase over Time? Although these data are not longitudinal, we can examine the degree of formal and informal participation by the father in the life of the family according to the age of the child. Table 6 compares fathers of babies aged 6 months or less to fathers of 1-year-olds, 2-year-olds, 3 year-olds, etc. Reading across the rows, one can see that the percentage of children whose fathers live in the household declines as the babies age, while the percentage who have legally identified absent fathers increases. By the time the babies reach age 3, about 42 percent in this sample had formal legal ties with the absent father (row 2). Some part of this increase is explained by the decline in those with resident fathers (row 1). Less than 40 percent of the absent fathers with child support orders paid anything. The proportion of identified fathers who paid seemed to peak at over half during the second and third year after the birth, and then unexplainedly dropped.

Among those who paid, the average amount contributed was approximately \$132.71, or a little over 30 dollars a week. The data do not indicate whether or not payments were regular or consistent.

The lower panel of the table, rows 7-10, indicates patterns of informal contact between absent fathers and their children. In all categories--frequency of visits, occasionally giving presents, or discussing the child with the mother on a regular basis--the degree of parenting activity of nonresidential fathers appears to decline as the child ages: the number who never visit goes up, to more than one-third,

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Table 6

Father Involvement by Years since Child's Birth

	At Age 6 Months or Less (N=86)	Age .6 to 1.0 Years (N=96)	1.1 to 2.0 (N=159)	2.1 to 3.0 (N=82)	Over Age 3 (N=60)
1. % with resident fathers	41.9	30.2	27.0	25.6	23.3
2. % with legally identified absent fathers	8.1	21.9	34.0	37.8	41.67
3. Of those with orders, % who pay	37.5	41.7	50.9	54.5	36.7
4. Of those who pay, mean monthly amount in dollars ^a	\$93.00	\$173.02	\$117.78	\$140.25	\$142.79
5. % with adjudication in process	31.4	22.9	14.5	17.1	16.7
6. % with unidentified fathers with no legal or formal financial ties ^b	18.6	25.0	24.5	19.5	18.3
7. % absent fathers who never visit	20.4	17.9	23.7	36.1	37.8
8. % absent fathers who visit child weekly or more	63.3	44.8	39.5	31.2	24.4
9. % absent fathers who occasionally buy presents	60.4	61.2	57.0	47.5	43.2
10. % absent fathers who discuss child with mother at least once a month	89.4	78.1	77.6	61.0	45.6

Source: Wisconsin Teen Welfare Mother Study, 1986-1987, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

^aThis contribution is reported as what he has paid and is standardized to a monthly basis among all who report a payment.

^bIncludes the few who are dead, unknown, or judged undesirable by the courts.

while the proportion who visit weekly or more goes down from about two-thirds to about one-quarter. Occasional purchases of toys, clothes, or other presents declines among absent fathers, as do regular discussions with mothers about the children. These patterns suggest that legal ties, which increase over time, appear to have little effect on the extent to which an informal fathering role is adopted by the absent father.

Do Absent Fathers Who Pay Participate More in the Children's Lives?

Table 7 compares levels of absent father participation in the child's life across the categories of formal legal identity and financial contribution. The first two columns show that the proportion who never visit is lowest among those who pay and highest among those who are involved in the early stages of court proceedings. On the other hand, in the bottom row, three-quarters of those who do not pay and those who are unidentified in a legal sense do visit the child on occasion, and one-third visit weekly. The proportion of those who visit frequently and regularly are highest among payors, but next highest are those fathers outside the legal system.

Patterns of occasional gift giving, in contrast to visits, are associated with the degree of formal and legal involvement, but there is no dramatic variation by degree of such involvement. In the fourth column, the occasional provision of primary care by the absent father occurs among half of the payors and half of the "unidentified" fathers.

(Primary care refers to the feeding and changing diapers of the child on occasion, taking him or her to the doctor, etc.)

Finally, column 5 shows that 60 percent of those outside the legal system and a slightly higher proportion of those who provide some

Table 7

Absent Fathers' Formal and Informal Involvement

	% Who Never Visit Child	% Who Visit Weekly or More	% Who Buy Presents	% Who Provide Primary Care	% Who Discuss Child with Mother at Least Once a Month
Pays some support N = 106	16.0	37.7	64.2	62.3	62.3
Has court order, does not pay N = 34	26.5	29.4	52.9	50.0	55.9
Court proceedings in process N = 98	37.8	23.5	45.9	38.8	53.1
Unidentified fathers with no formal legal or financial ties ^a N = 108	24.1	33.3	46.3	50.0	60.2

Source: Wisconsin Teen Welfare Mother Study, 1986-1987, Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

^aThis includes the few who are dead, unknown, or judged undesirable by the courts.

payment have regular discussions with the mother about the child. Somewhat surprisingly, the least variation in absent-father informal participation in family life appears in this last category. Regardless of the absent father's legal status or degree of financial contribution, the mothers report that they have informal, regular contact regarding the child with a strong majority of these men.

CONCLUSIONS

Preliminary evidence on patterns of absent-father relationships among a sample of teen welfare mother families suggests that many of the couples no longer had personal relationships. Of those absent fathers who are legally identified, a significant minority provide at least some child support. Their contribution is not, however, impressive; payments average only a little over \$30.00 a week. Those who provide support have somewhat better economic prospects than their peers who either live with the children or who have no legal obligations or formal ties. Judging from the fathers' work experience, there is greater potential for providing some financial support. It is important to note, however, that among minorities the absent father is rarely married to, living with, or providing support to the teen mother family.

For example, of minority status mothers, less than 1 percent are married to or live with the father, whereas 40 percent of the white mothers live with the fathers. Only one-third of the fathers of minority families have a legal agreement, yet half pay something. One-third of absent fathers in white families also have legal agreements; however, of that group, almost three-quarters contribute some support. Future

research should analyze patterns such as those cited earlier separately for whites, blacks, and Hispanics, as Lerman has pointed out (1987).

Informal participation by absent fathers in the children's lives declines as the baby's age increases, but does not vary dramatically by legal status of the father. Many of those outside the paternity and child support system talk regularly with the mother and visit and provide care for their children. Finally, very few of the fathers appear by official agency designation or by the mother's report to be unfit or totally unavailable for parenting.

These results seem at first to confirm the conclusions of others who suggest a more positive view of youth who are fathering the babies of adolescent single mothers. These data do not provide evidence of marital ties that is claimed in the work of Lerman, Vinovskis and others (see Lerman, 1987; Parke and Neville, 1987; Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale, 1987). In this sample, residential fatherhood and marriage declines, while separation, divorce, or break up of the nonmarried couple increases, as the child ages.

However, the absent father's informal, continuing contact with the child as reported in this study is higher than the social service literature would indicate. The evidence of this ongoing relationship is from the teen mother's report and does not vary much by formal legal and financial involvement. It is surprisingly consistent with Sullivan's (1987) ethnographic data on patterns of teen fathering in inner-city neighborhoods in New York City. Confirmation based on such different data sets merits policy consideration.

Given that absent fatherhood--i.e., nonresidential and nonmarital fatherhood--is the most likely outcome of a teen birth, and virtually the

only outcome for minority youth, it seems important for public policy to build upon the present level of informal contact and to encourage the child's claim to legal paternity, and, eventually, to child support. As Wattenberg suggests, the short-term economic gains may be slight, but the long-run potential for ability to pay should not be underestimated. A good many of these young men--regardless of formal involvement and even if they are minority members--go on to further training, education, employment, and earnings (Marsiglio, 1986; Sullivan, 1987).

Some recent policy developments attempt to promote more legal identification of these fathers by changing the incentive structure for local child support agencies. In the welfare reform bill introduced by Daniel P. Moynihan in the U.S. Senate in 1987, the federal child support enforcement agency would reward states for increasing their rate of paternity adjudications relative to their single-parent birth rates and would increase early monitoring of the economic potential of absent fathers. The bill would require that birth certificates bear social security numbers of two parents, resulting in immediate formal father identification. Were this to work, it would reduce the capriciousness and haphazardness of the current system of paternity establishment. It may not, however, bring about more formal child support for these families, and it may not, in the short run, have poverty-reducing effects.

While we may be far from requiring that formal child support be obtained from every absent parent, we are likely to see a shift in the legal processing of these matters that indicates increasing advocacy of the child's rightful claim to a father. Whether this will increase the level of parenting provided by absent fathers remains to be seen. The preliminary evidence presented here certainly indicates that an increase

in legal formal fatherhood is not likely to reduce informal father involvement. Nor is it likely to create negative consequences for most teen single mothers and their children.

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