

Chapter 1

Fathers of Children in W-2 Families: Results of an Analysis of Administrative and Survey Data

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I. Introduction

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 made radical changes to the way the nation provides income support to low-income families.¹ The main program that provided cash assistance to single-parent families for over 60 years, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), was replaced with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF allows states to design their own programs, has a focus on work, and establishes a lifetime limit on cash assistance. Because many TANF recipients have limited human capital, their earnings may always be below the poverty level. Because cash assistance is time-limited, and earnings are likely to be low, other sources of income have become more critical to the long-term economic well-being of these women and their children.² The legislation that created TANF recognized this, and also included substantial changes to the child support system designed to increase the amount of support that nonresident fathers pay. Part of the motivation for the child support reform was a hope that some single mothers would be able to rely on a combination of support from the nonresident fathers and their own earnings in place of cash assistance. Another motivation was a sense that some nonresident fathers were not providing what they could for their children, leaving taxpayers to foot the bill.

Who are these fathers and are they able to provide adequate amounts of support for children receiving TANF? Although the political rhetoric suggested that fathers could be providing substantially more for their children, several factors lead to skepticism regarding the potential for dramatically increased child support collections from this population. First, individuals tend to partner with others who have similar characteristics. Thus, because the mothers receiving TANF generally have low levels of education, many of the fathers of their children can be expected to have similarly low levels, limiting their earning potential. Second, as many families have left TANF programs, one might expect those who remain to include those least able to achieve economic self-sufficiency. If the fathers of their children have similar characteristics, the fathers of welfare recipients might therefore be those least able to provide support. Finally, the child support reforms come after two decades of child support changes, largely intended to increase the amount paid. It may be that most of the gains in child support have already been achieved, leaving only cases with little potential for collection.

Is this pessimistic account accurate? Or can fathers begin providing substantially more support? There have been a variety of studies of this question over the years, but surprisingly little is known about the fathers of current welfare recipients and their potential to provide more child support. The purpose of this report is to summarize information on the fathers of children receiving TANF in Wisconsin, focusing on their ability to pay support. The report provides a general portrait of all fathers of children in the Child Support Demonstration Evaluation (CSDE) sample and draws on data for those in both the experimental

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²Some men receive cash assistance, but the numbers are very few. For this reason, we focus our language (and analysis) on the recipient families in which children live with their mothers, making the mother the resident parent and the father the nonresident parent.

and control groups. Although we note occasions in which outcomes are significantly different in the two groups, our focus here is to use the information on all fathers to provide a context for interpreting the results of the ethnographic research presented in Chapter 2.³

II. Previous Literature

A number of previous researchers have explored the characteristics of nonresident fathers of children, focusing on their ability to pay support. For example, Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson (1998) summarized the range of previous income estimates and showed that the range for all nonresident fathers—not just those whose children receive welfare—was about \$29,000 to \$32,400 (in \$1999).⁴ They also provided a new estimate, which is within this range. Sorensen (1997) reported average personal income of nonresident fathers to be somewhat lower, at about \$24,500, with poverty rates of 15–25 percent among this group. Meyer (1998) also estimated median personal income of fathers at about \$24,500, and provided additional information showing substantial variation in fathers' incomes—one-quarter of fathers had incomes below \$7,300 and one-quarter had incomes above \$41,000.

Because these estimates are based on all nonresident fathers, they do not provide much information on the fathers of children receiving welfare. As might be expected, estimates for these fathers show substantially lower income. For example, Oellerich (1984) estimated mean personal income of the fathers of Wisconsin AFDC recipients to be about \$16,000, compared with his estimates for all divorced fathers of about \$37,500 and all separated fathers of about \$28,000. Other estimates of the mean or median personal income of the fathers of AFDC recipients in North Carolina (Haskins, Schwartz, and Akin, 1985) and Ohio and Florida (Sonenstein and Calhoun, 1990) are also in the \$11,000–\$16,000 range.

Two more recent surveys have related information, though not a direct estimate of the ability of the fathers of children receiving welfare to provide support. Rangarajan and Gleason (1998) examined teen mothers receiving welfare in Camden, NJ, Newark, NJ, and Chicago who were asked questions about the fathers of their children. Although they did not present estimates of these fathers' incomes, they did note that only about two-thirds had a high school education, so their overall ability to pay may be low. Rich (2001) provided information on fathers of “fragile families” in seven large cities across the United States. Her sample included fathers of children receiving welfare, as well as other fathers. She found average incomes of about \$17,000 for the unmarried fathers, with 40 percent of them earning less than \$9,000.

Some research literature has examined whether paying child support is impoverishing fathers (see, for example, Bartfeld, 2000; Meyer, 1998; Nichols-Casebolt, 1986; Sorensen, 1997). This literature has found that few fathers fall below the poverty line because of the amount of support they are ordered to pay, or the amount they actually pay. Nonetheless, fathers with low incomes are generally ordered to pay a higher proportion of their income in child support than are fathers with moderate or high incomes. Whether the nonresident fathers of welfare recipients, particularly current recipients, can afford to pay more support is unknown.

³For a discussion of the impact of the CSDE on outcomes for fathers, see *W-2 Child Support Demonstration Evaluation, Phase 1: Final Report* (Meyer and Cancian, 2001), especially sections I.4.1 (child support payments), I.4.2 (paternity establishment and child support orders), I.4.7 (fathers' employment and earnings), I.4.8 (fathers' income and economic hardship), and I.4.9 (fathers' social and economic involvement).

⁴For consistency we convert all dollar amounts to 1999 dollars using the CPI-U.

Research in this area has been limited by the difficulty of collecting adequate data on the nonresident fathers of children receiving welfare. One approach has been to survey mothers, collecting information on their welfare use and asking them questions about the characteristics of the fathers of their children. This was the approach taken in the first national sample about child support, the Current Population Survey - Child Support Supplement of 1980. However, relatively few mothers responded with current information about the father, so these questions were dropped in subsequent years. Moreover, even if more mothers had responded, those who did would include only mothers who had stayed in touch with the father or had other sources of information on the fathers' current situation, and thus the information would probably not have been representative of all fathers of children receiving welfare.

A second approach has been to examine mothers receiving welfare, and from their characteristics attempt to estimate what the fathers of these children were like (see, for example, Oellerich, 1984, and Miller, Garfinkel, and McLanahan, 1997). These estimates rely on the accuracy of the estimation method and the assumptions about the relationship between the characteristics of mothers and the characteristics of the fathers of their children. A third approach has been to use the administrative records of the child support office, perhaps combined with administrative records on earnings and welfare use (see Haskins, Schwartz, and Akin, 1985, for an example). A limitation of this work is that a substantial number of fathers do not have administrative records of earnings, perhaps because they are not working at all (including those in prison), are working out of state, or have other sources of income (e.g., working in the informal economy or self-employed). Finally, some have looked at the characteristics of men who claim to be fathers. This approach is also limited in that the number of men claiming to have fathered a child is much smaller than the number of women who have had children. In addition, the standard surveys tend to undercount low-income men, primarily men of color, especially if they are only loosely attached to more than one household. Although a variety of strategies have been used to address these problems, including reweighting the data (see Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson, 1998, and Sorensen, 1997), uncertainty remains. Another limitation of this approach is that many men do not know if the mother of their children is receiving welfare. Finally, attempts to interview nonresident fathers have been beset with numerous problems, with low response rates a particular concern (see, for example, Hofferth et al., 1997).

III. Data and Sample

An ideal data set for examining the economic status of the fathers of children receiving welfare would have information on matched pairs of fathers and mothers. Fathers' reports could be used to measure their characteristics, and mothers' reports could be used as the source of information on welfare participation. Moreover, one could argue that the ideal data set would combine survey and administrative data, since welfare use is not reported accurately in surveys (e.g., see Meyer and Sullivan, 2001). Finally, having access to recent data is particularly important given that both the child support and welfare systems have undergone substantial reform in the last several years. Tougher laws on paternity establishment may mean that there are more legal fathers of welfare recipients than previously and that the fathers brought into the system may not be similar to those in the system previously. The welfare policy changes of 1996, combined with an unprecedented economic expansion, have led to the lowest welfare caseloads in years. Given caseload declines, current welfare recipients (and the fathers of their children) may represent a different population than the welfare recipients (and the fathers of their children) of a decade ago (see, for example, Cancian and Meyer, 1995; for a different perspective, see Zedlewski and Alderson, 2001).

Although we do not have a single data source that is ideal, as discussed in detail below, we do have information on matched pairs, administrative data on welfare payments, and quite recent data. We combine several sources of data, attempting to choose the best source for each question.

Administrative Records

We use three sources of administrative records. CARES, a management information system for the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, provides information on those receiving W-2, including demographic characteristics and information about program receipt. The second source is KIDS, the management information system for child support. KIDS contains limited demographic information on fathers and information on child support orders and payments. It also contains information on paternity, so we can examine whether each of the children living with the mother has a legal father (that is, whether each child was a marital child—in which case legal paternity is presumed—or a nonmarital child for whom paternity has been formally established). The third source is the earnings information in the Unemployment Insurance (UI) data system. The UI file contains quarterly earnings for individual covered workers. “Covered” workers include about 91 percent of Wisconsin workers. Not covered are the self-employed, federal employees, commission sales workers, farmers, church employees, and employees of not-for-profit organizations with fewer than four workers. Also lacking is information on the earnings of any workers employed outside of Wisconsin. UI records do not provide information on occupations, hourly wages, or hours worked.

Our analysis of administrative records begins with CARES, and includes all mothers who entered W-2 during its initial months (that is, from September 1, 1997, through July 9, 1998) and who were demographically eligible for child support (that is, there was a living nonresident father). We make other selected sample exclusions to reach the sample of mothers in the CSDE, as described by Meyer and Cancian (2001). The final sample includes 15,977 mothers, about three-quarters of the mothers who entered W-2 over this period. We merge these records with information from KIDS, using the mother’s Social Security number. About 30 percent of these mothers have only nonmarital children who have not had paternity established, so no legal fathers associated with these mothers are in our sample. Of the remaining 11,179 mothers, 28 percent are associated with more than one legal father. This results in a total of 14,343 couples. However, because about 7 percent of the fathers are associated with more than one mother in our sample, and because we include each father only once, our final sample includes 13,339 fathers. In these analyses, we use fathers in both the experimental and control groups of the CSDE, noting when there is a significant difference between the two groups. For this sample of legal fathers of children in families receiving W-2, we use the Social Security number from KIDS to merge the earnings records from the UI data system. We also use CARES data to identify any additional legal children of the father from among all the children whose mother received W-2 at any point between September 1997 and September 2000.

We present descriptive information on the 13,339 legal fathers of children in families receiving W-2, based on information in the administrative records, including age, race, number of children, and selected information on the mother receiving W-2.⁵ We also present earnings information on the 12,732 fathers for whom we have Social Security numbers and thus have searched for an earnings record in the UI file.

In analyses using administrative data, we present information on the entire sample. We also present information separately for two subgroups. We present data for African American fathers in Milwaukee because this is the sample used in the ethnographic research presented in Chapter 2. We also

⁵When a father is associated with more than one mother, we employ several strategies. For the number of children, for example, we sum across mothers. For the fathers of children without AFDC history, we examine the mothers of all of his children. For mother’s education, we randomly select a mother to consider.

present limited information on fathers whose children had not received AFDC in the 2 years prior to W-2 entry.⁶ This subgroup provides information on fathers who are generally new to the welfare system.

Survey Data

We surveyed mothers and fathers in the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families (Krecker, 2001). We attempted to survey about 3,000 mothers in spring 1999 (covering calendar year 1998) and again in spring 2000 (covering calendar year 1999).⁷ Completion rates for mothers were 82 percent during each period. We also randomly selected one “focal” child for each mother, and, if that child had a legal father, attempted to survey him. Location of fathers was particularly difficult, and completion rates were 33 percent during each period. Completion rates were higher for fathers in a random subsample eligible for in-person as well as telephone interviews, 43 percent at Time 1 and 46 percent at Time 2. The data on fathers were weighted to account for differential nonresponse (see Ziliak and Krecker, 2001). We have information on 572 fathers at Time 1 and 603 at Time 2.⁸

The survey contains demographic information on fathers, including education, health, family background, their own earnings, other income, their spouse’s or partner’s earnings and other income, and the composition of their households.

IV. Findings

We use data from administrative sources, as well as from the surveys of mothers and fathers, to describe the characteristics and situation of nonresident fathers of children whose mothers received W-2 benefits. In addition to the basic demographic characteristics of these families, we report on fathers’ family background, health, financial resources, and assets. We present descriptive information on nonresident fathers’ earnings and income, as well as poverty and economic hardship. We show current child support paid, as well as an estimate of potential support.

Characteristics of Nonresident Fathers of Children Whose Families Receive W-2

Table 1 shows characteristics of the legal fathers of children whose families receive W-2, with information taken from the administrative records at the time the family entered W-2. The first two panels show age and race. The first column, reflecting the full sample, shows that nearly half of these men are younger than age 30, and about 20 percent are younger than 25. Although these men are relatively young, they are older on average than the mothers of W-2 children, of whom 64.1 percent are younger than 30. Although we do not know the race of a substantial number of fathers, more than three-quarters of the men whose race we know are men of color, primarily African Americans.

In the next panels, we consider all children for whom each man is a legal father and whose mothers received W-2 at any point between September 1997 and September 2000. About four-fifths of

⁶We check welfare history in the 2 years prior to each case’s “baseline,” which is generally defined as the time of a W-2 interview (for cases that transitioned from AFDC) or a request for W-2 assistance (for cases that did not transition). See Cancian, Caspar, and Meyer (2001) for more details.

⁷The target sample was a stratified random sample of mothers in the administrative data sample, stratified on the initial W-2 tier and on whether a case transitioned from AFDC to W-2 or was a new case.

⁸We also have limited information on fathers from some mothers who were asked to provide basic information on the father of the focal child.

TABLE 1
Initial Characteristics of Nonresident Legal Fathers and Associated Resident Mothers,
Administrative Data

Characteristics	All		African American Fathers in Milwaukee		Fathers Whose Children Had no History of AFDC Receipt	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
All Nonresident Fathers	13,339	100.0	4,144	100.0	765	100.0
Characteristics of Fathers						
Age of Father						
Missing	112	0.8	1	0.0	13	1.7
<20	313	2.4	95	2.3	31	4.1
20–24	2,595	19.5	862	20.8	110	14.4
25–29	3,571	26.8	1,251	30.2	148	19.4
30–34	2,818	21.1	894	21.6	163	21.3
35–39	2,108	15.8	585	14.1	155	20.3
40+	1,822	13.7	456	11.0	145	19.0
Race of Father						
Unknown	5,436	40.8	n.a.	n.a.	308	40.3
White	1,802	13.5	n.a.	n.a.	289	37.8
African American	5,219	39.1	n.a.	n.a.	128	16.7
Hispanic	583	4.4	n.a.	n.a.	24	3.1
Native American	220	1.7	n.a.	n.a.	14	1.8
Asian	79	0.6	n.a.	n.a.	2	0.3
Marital vs. Nonmarital Child						
Only nonmarital children	10,740	80.5	3,803	91.8	339	44.3
Only marital children	2,098	15.7	189	4.6	406	53.1
At least one of each	467	3.5	151	3.6	13	1.7
At least one unknown	34	0.3	1	0.0	7	0.9
Number of Children						
One	6,579	49.3	1,657	40.0	449	58.7
Two	3,466	26.0	1,101	26.6	222	29.0
Three or more	3,294	24.7	1,386	33.5	94	12.3

(table continues)

TABLE 1, continued

Characteristics	All		African American Fathers in Milwaukee		Fathers Whose Children Had no History of AFDC Receipt	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Characteristics of Mother^a						
Mother's AFDC Receipt in Last 2 Years Before Entry						
None	969	7.3	161	3.9	765	100.0
1–18 months	3,974	29.8	975	23.5	0	0.0
19–24 months	8,396	62.9	3,008	72.6	0	0.0
Education of Mother						
Missing	245	1.8	117	2.8	1	0.1
Less than high school	6,846	51.3	2,323	56.1	230	30.1
High school diploma	4,896	36.7	1,394	33.6	371	48.5
Some beyond high school	1,352	10.1	310	7.5	163	21.3
Children Who Don't Belong to This Father						
Missing	225	1.7	107	2.6	1	0.1
Several legal fathers	5,591	41.9	1,876	45.3	189	24.7
One legal father, but other unestablished paternities	3,507	26.3	1,101	26.6	162	21.2
One father	4,016	30.1	1,060	25.6	413	54.0

Source: KIDS, CARES.

^aWhere fathers were associated with more than one mother, we show the characteristics of a randomly selected mother in these panels.

these fathers had only nonmarital children in families receiving W-2. About half the fathers had one nonresident child, about one-quarter had two, and about one-quarter had three or more. Because only children currently in families receiving W-2 are included in this count, it is likely to be an underestimate. Nonetheless, it suggests that at least half of these fathers face obligations to support multiple children.

In the remaining panels we show characteristics of the mother of each father's children.⁹ The first panel shows that the majority of men were partnered with long-term AFDC recipients. Although we do not have information in the administrative record on the educational level of these men, the educational level of their partners provides a crude indicator of their own characteristics because many men have similar characteristics to those with whom they partner. About half the fathers were partnered with women with less than a high school diploma, suggesting that they may have limited education themselves. Finally, the last panel shows that many of these men were partnered with women who have complicated families. In two-fifths of the families, there is at least one child from a different father, in addition to the child(ren) of this father.¹⁰ Moreover, in another one-quarter, there are children for whom paternity has not yet been established, who may be fathered by another man.¹¹

The second column shows the characteristics of 4,144 African American fathers in Milwaukee, the sample for the ethnographic research presented in Chapter 2.¹² These fathers were similar in age to the whole sample, had more children, were more likely to have had nonmarital children, and were partnered with women with more AFDC history, somewhat lower education, and somewhat more complicated families.¹³ These factors may be associated with a reduced ability to pay support.

The final column of Table 1 focuses on fathers "new" to the welfare system (that is, fathers who at the time of their children's entry to W-2 were not legal fathers of *any* children who had received

⁹In these rows, when men are associated with more than one W-2 participant, we show the characteristics of a randomly selected participant.

¹⁰The proportion of nonresident fathers whose children live in households that include children of another father is higher than the proportion of mothers in this sample who have children from multiple fathers. Assume, for example, that there are 100 mothers, 80 of whom have children with one father (totaling 80 fathers), and 20 have children with two fathers (totaling 40 fathers). When we examine fathers, 33 percent (40 out of 120 fathers) will have partnered with mothers who have multiple partners, and only 20 percent of mothers (20 out of 100) will have been partnered with multiple fathers. The difference in this sample is even greater, in part because the sample of fathers by definition excludes cases in which no legal father has been identified.

¹¹Table 1 shows characteristics for the full sample, including fathers of children with mothers in the control group and fathers of children with mothers in the experimental group. Because W-2 participants were randomly assigned to the two groups, we expect baseline characteristics to be similar, and generally they are. However, there are statistically significant differences in mother's AFDC history (59 percent of control cases had received AFDC benefits in at least 19 of the last 24 months, compared with 65 percent of cases in the experimental group), mother's education (49 percent of mothers in the control group and 52 percent of mothers in the experimental group had less than a high school education), and the proportion for which there are children in the household from another father (42 percent for the control group, 43 for the experimental).

¹²This column includes 2,494 African American fathers in Milwaukee and an additional 1,650 fathers in Milwaukee of unknown race, but for whom the mother is African American. We impute race to these fathers because when we know the race of both parties and the mother is African American, 98 percent of the fathers are African American. Additional analyses based on the more restrictive sample of 2,494 generally show similar patterns.

We use KIDS data from September 1997 through June 2000 to ascertain whether a father lives in a ZIP Code in the city of Milwaukee. These records do not have a continuous record of addresses; we assume that fathers stay at a given address until there is a record of a change.

¹³These patterns also hold when we consider a sample of all nonresident fathers.

AFDC within the last 2 years). These men were somewhat older, much more likely to be white, had fewer children, and were much more likely to have had marital children. They were partnered with women with higher education and less complicated families. These characteristics suggest a greater ability to pay support.

Table 2 provides a richer set of descriptive information on the 572 men who responded to the first wave of the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families. As discussed above, these data have been weighted in an attempt to correct for nonresponse (see Ziliak and Kreckler, 2001). This table also reveals substantial barriers to employment and earnings. For example, the first panel shows that about one-third of those in the sample had less than a high school diploma, and only one in five had education beyond high school. About three-fifths of the fathers reported either excellent or very good health, but 17 percent reported either fair or poor health, and about one-fifth stated that they had a health problem that deterred work.

The next three panels show information about these fathers' families of origin. Few had parents with more than a high school diploma, although the proportion not knowing their mother's or their father's educational level is substantial, about one-third. More than half did not live with both parents through age 16.

The final panels provide information on housing, transportation, and use of financial institutions. Home ownership is relatively uncommon and nearly half the fathers were renting. A surprisingly large number shared housing, over one-quarter lived with relatives, and another 6 percent lived with friends. These situations may be less stable than those in which the father owned or rented. Only about one-quarter of fathers reported that the safety of their neighborhood was "excellent," with 11 percent reporting that it was "fair" or "bad." About half of fathers reported owning a car (about a third of those who did not own a car reported other access to a vehicle, not shown on table). However, use of formal financial institutions was low: about one in five fathers reported having a credit card, and about two in five had a checking and/or savings account.¹⁴

The second column focuses on 151 African American fathers in Milwaukee. These fathers had similar levels of education, tended to report somewhat better health, came from more disadvantaged families, were somewhat less likely to own their own home, and were much less likely to report that their neighborhood was safe. In the final column, we examine 116 fathers whose children did not have recent AFDC history. Again these fathers appear more advantaged, had higher education, were more likely to own a car and to have a credit card and a checking or savings account, and were more likely to report living in a safe neighborhood.

Overall, the figures in Tables 1 and 2 suggest that many of the fathers of children whose families are in W-2 have relatively low levels of human capital and few economic resources to draw on in supporting their children. We now turn to measures of fathers' current earnings and income.

¹⁴Table 2 reports the characteristics of fathers of children with mothers assigned to the experimental group, and of fathers of children with mothers assigned to the control group. There are statistically significant differences for the following characteristics: housing status (45 percent of control group fathers versus 49 percent of experimental group fathers rented), rating of neighborhood safety (40 percent of control group fathers and 53 percent of experimental group fathers rated neighborhood safety as very good or excellent), and car ownership (42 percent of control group fathers and 54 percent of experimental group fathers owned a car).

TABLE 2
Initial Characteristics of Nonresident Legal Fathers and Associated Resident Mothers,
Survey Data

Characteristics	All		African American Fathers in Milwaukee		Fathers Whose Children Had no History of AFDC Receipt	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
All Nonresident Fathers	572		151		116	
Father's Education						
Less than high school	147	32.1	46	31.3	22	18.7
High school diploma	305	48.3	77	51.5	61	53.4
Some beyond high school	120	19.6	28	17.2	33	27.9
Father's Health						
Excellent	148	29.3	38	31.9	32	24.4
Very good	173	29.2	48	36.5	41	33.0
Good	168	24.8	44	21.4	32	31.3
Fair	69	14.4	16	6.8	7	6.3
Poor	14	2.2	5	3.4	4	5.0
Health Problem That Deters Work						
Yes	93	21.0	29	24.4	14	15.1
No	479	79.0	122	75.6	102	84.9
Education of His Mother						
High school dropout	89	15.2	24	21.4	16	14.6
High school	237	39.2	62	38.9	56	46.2
More than high school	69	11.3	15	10.7	14	14.6
Don't know/refusal	177	34.4	50	29.0	30	24.6
Education of His Father						
High school dropout	100	19.8	19	25.0	25	16.3
High school	173	24.8	41	21.0	42	34.9
More than high school	70	9.8	17	8.4	13	16.1
Don't know/refusal	229	45.7	74	45.6	36	32.8
Lived with Both Parents until 16						
Yes	256	45.6	52	37.2	59	52.7
No	316	54.4	99	62.8	57	47.3

(table continues)

TABLE 2, continued

Characteristics	All		African American Fathers in Milwaukee		Fathers Whose Children Had no History of AFDC Receipt	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Housing Status						
Own	74	14.7	15	9.2	23	20.3
Rent	305	46.6	89	52.7	61	52.1
Live in friend's home	31	6.4	12	8.2	5	4.2
Live in relative's home	141	27.1	30	23.6	20	16.9
Homeless/living on street	1	1.3	1	3.4	0	0.0
Don't know/refusal	20	3.9	4	2.9	7	6.5
Safety of Neighborhood						
Excellent	129	23.4	14	8.0	34	31.6
Very good	165	25.2	37	23.6	38	37.9
Good	223	40.7	75	52.7	36	26.1
Fair	32	7.7	14	10.0	6	3.8
Bad	22	3.0	10	5.8	1	0.7
Own a Car						
Yes	353	49.2	76	44.5	91	74.5
No	218	50.8	75	55.5	24	25.3
Don't know/refusal	1	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.3
Credit Cards						
Yes	115	18.1	20	13.7	36	29.6
No	456	81.8	131	86.3	79	70.2
Don't know/refusal	1	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.3
Has Checking or Savings Account						
Checking account	80	10.2	11	4.9	23	19.2
Savings account	103	16.3	18	10.9	21	16.0
Both checking and savings account	103	13.6	21	7.3	33	25.2
No checking or savings account	282	59.6	100	76.1	38	39.3
Don't know/refusal	4	0.4	1	0.9	1	0.3

Source: Fathers' responses in the first wave of the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families, fielded in Spring, 1999.

Economic Status of These Fathers

In this chapter, we examine fathers' earnings and income before paying child support. A more detailed discussion of earnings, as well as information on wages, job skills, and occupations, can be found in Cancian and Haveman (2001). As above, we report economic status for all fathers, those with children living with mothers in the control group, and those with children living with mothers in the experimental group. We note outcomes for which the experimental impact evaluation suggests a significant difference between the two groups.¹⁵

Figure 1 shows the distribution of fathers' earnings in the UI records in 1998 and 1999. The first two bars show that these earnings are very low. In 1998, 38 percent of fathers had no earnings recorded in the UI records, and another 33 percent had earnings of less than \$10,000. Only about 5 percent had earnings above \$30,000. There was little improvement among these categories between 1998 and 1999.¹⁶

Fewer African American fathers in Milwaukee had no recorded earnings, but more had earnings between \$1 and \$10,000, making the total percentage with earnings of less than \$10,000 about the same. As might be expected, fathers of children who did not have recent AFDC experience had somewhat higher earnings, but even among these fathers, 60 percent have reported earnings below \$10,000.

Although the share of fathers with no earnings was quite similar between 1998 and 1999, for those fathers with earnings, earnings did increase, from a mean of \$11,800 to \$13,000 and from a median of \$8,600 to \$9,800. But the overall increase masks substantial change at the individual level. Figure 2 examines the change in earnings from 1998 to 1999. About half the fathers showed very little change in earnings from 1998 to 1999; two-thirds of these were fathers without earnings in either year. Consistent with the small increase in mean and median earnings, those with large increases slightly outnumber those with large decreases (13 percent to 9 percent), and those with small increases slightly outnumber those with small decreases (16 percent to 13 percent).

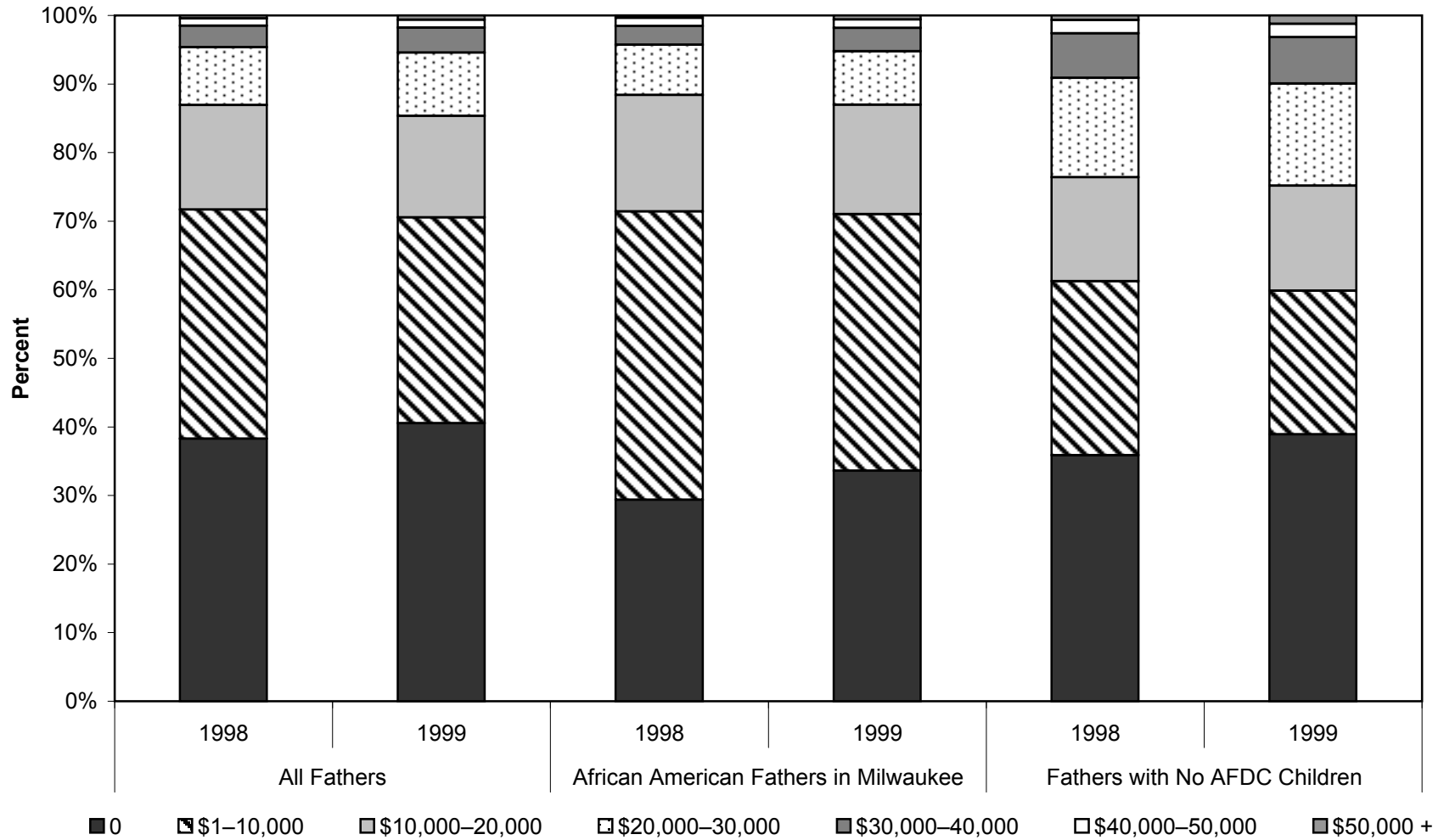
Earnings are not the only source of income for the fathers of children receiving welfare. We now turn to the survey to examine other sources of nonresident fathers' family income, as reported by these

¹⁵As discussed in the experimental impact report (Meyer and Cancian, 2001, see especially Cancian, Caspar and Meyer, Technical Report 1 in Volume III) the experimental evaluation relies on regression-adjusted results. The figures reported here are very similar, but a simple comparison of these figures for the experimental and control groups is not strictly equivalent to the comparison used in the experimental impact evaluation.

¹⁶For some fathers, we also have survey information on their own reports of their income. In addition, some mothers were asked questions about the income of the father of one of their children. When we consider *all* fathers, these other sources provide additional information on only a few men, in part because we have survey information on few fathers and because many mothers did not report their ex-partners' income. Thus, while we are missing earnings information in the UI record for 607 fathers (those for whom we have no Social Security number), we are able to gain information on only 30 of these in 1998 and 26 in 1999 from the surveys.

One of the disadvantages of the UI data is the large number of fathers who have no earnings record. In all calculations in the main text, we treat these fathers as having zero earnings. If we instead treat these fathers as having missing earnings, then survey responses become more important. For example, consider a hierarchy in which we first examine the father's own report, then if that is missing, examine the mother's proxy report, then if that is missing, examine the UI data. In this hierarchy, if we count those cases with no UI data as zero income, we have information for 12,762 fathers in 1998, with 71 percent having income less than \$10,000. On the other hand, if we count those with no UI data as missing, we have information for only 8,135 fathers in 1998, with 54 percent having income less than \$10,000. This suggests that a substantial proportion of fathers will have low income even if we make optimistic assumptions.

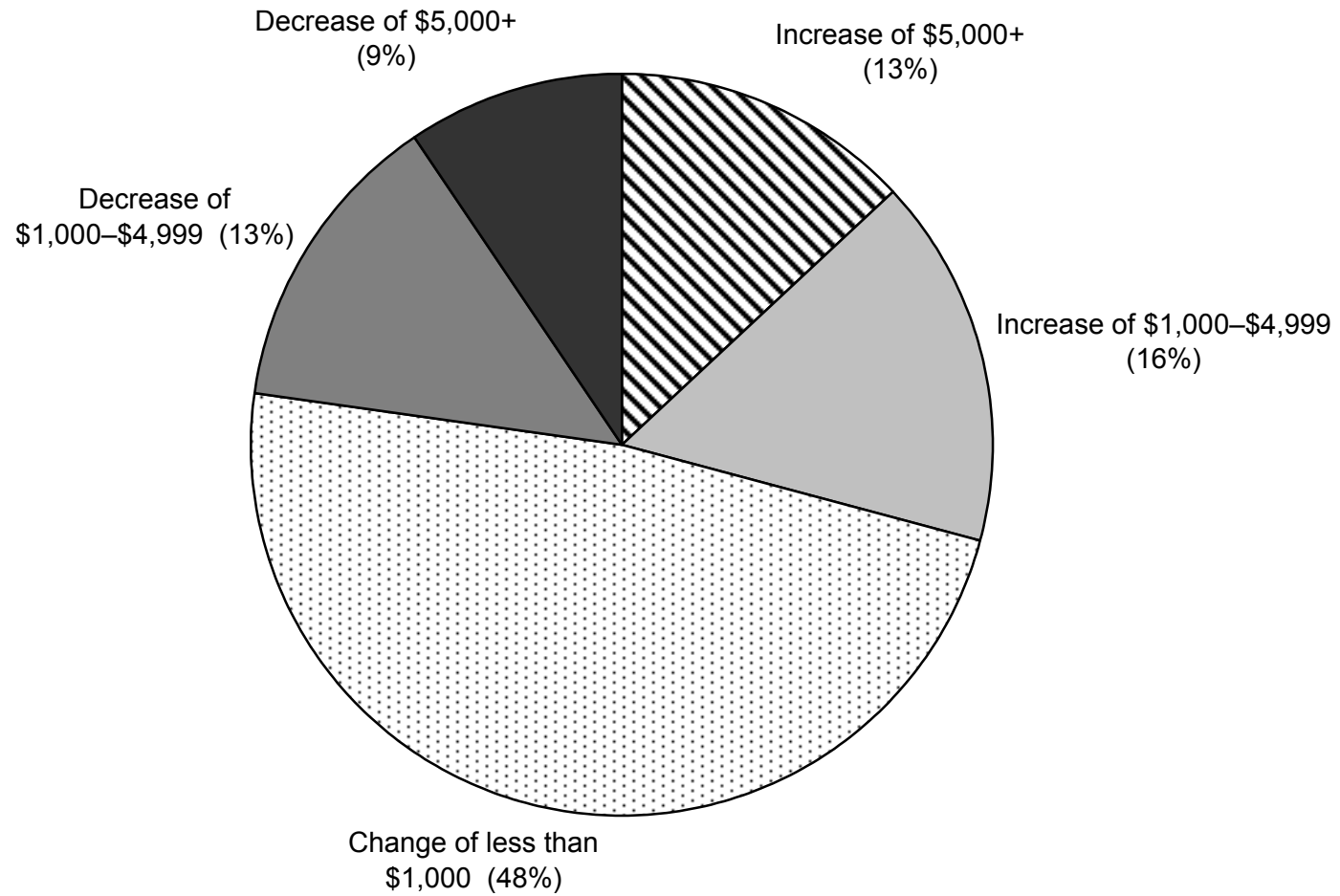
FIGURE 1
Earnings of Fathers



Source: Unemployment Insurance records.

The sample of all fathers includes 13,339 cases. Of these, 607 cases were excluded here because the Social Security number was missing and there was no match with UI records. Thus, 12,732 cases were used in the figure. The sample of African American fathers includes 4,046 cases. Of these, 98 cases were missing because the Social Security number was missing and there was no match with UI records. Thus, 3,948 cases were used in the figure. The sample of fathers whose children had no history of AFDC receipt includes 765 cases. Of these, 40 cases were missing because the Social Security number was missing and there was no match with UI records. Thus, 725 cases were used in the figure.

FIGURE 2
Changes in Earnings, 1998–1999



Source: Unemployment Insurance records.

The full sample includes 13,339 cases. Of these, 607 cases were excluded here because the Social Security numbers were missing and there was no match with UI records. Thus, 12,732 cases were used in the figure.

fathers.¹⁷ When we examine income in the survey, we show results for all fathers, not subgroups.¹⁸ Figure 3 shows that a father's own earnings were about 70 percent of the family income package in both years. In 1998, 78 percent of fathers reported earnings, with an average among these fathers of \$14,600, and an overall average (including those without earnings) of \$11,400. These amounts are higher than the averages in the administrative record: the 62 percent of fathers with earnings in the administrative record had average earnings of \$11,800, with an overall average of only \$7,300. About 30 percent of fathers reported other income, which may include unemployment compensation, Social Security Disability, SSI, etc. Among fathers who reported this source, it averaged about \$2,600; over all fathers, it averaged about \$800. Thus, average personal income for these fathers was about \$12,200, within the range of the estimates from the previous literature. Only a minority of fathers were living with partners, but among the 30 percent of the sample who had partners with earnings, this was a significant source, averaging over \$12,000, for an overall average of nearly \$4,000. Other income from a partner increases average family income of nonresident fathers by about \$600, raising total average family income for nonresident fathers in 1998 to \$16,620.

Between 1998 and 1999, both the share of fathers with earnings and the share of fathers with other income increased, as did the average amounts, bringing a father's personal income total to \$15,200. Partner income was quite similar to 1999, bringing total average family income for nonresident fathers to \$19,566.

There was substantial diversity within this average, as shown in Figure 4. Half of fathers had family incomes of \$10,000 or lower in 1998, and nearly one-third had family income of \$5,000 or less. In contrast, 9 percent of fathers had family incomes over \$40,000. The increase in income between 1998 and 1999 seen in Figure 3 is due in large part to fewer fathers having very low incomes—the percentage with incomes of \$10,000 or less declined from 50 percent in 1998 to 33 percent in 1999.

A more explicit examination of income changes is shown in Figure 5. Of fathers for whom we have information on family incomes in both years, 43 percent showed a large increase (\$5,000 or more), and another 18 percent showed a small increase (\$1,000–\$4,999). On the other hand, 17 percent of fathers showed a large decrease. This figure shows substantially more change than the figures on changes in earnings using administrative data, in part because there are fewer fathers with zero income.

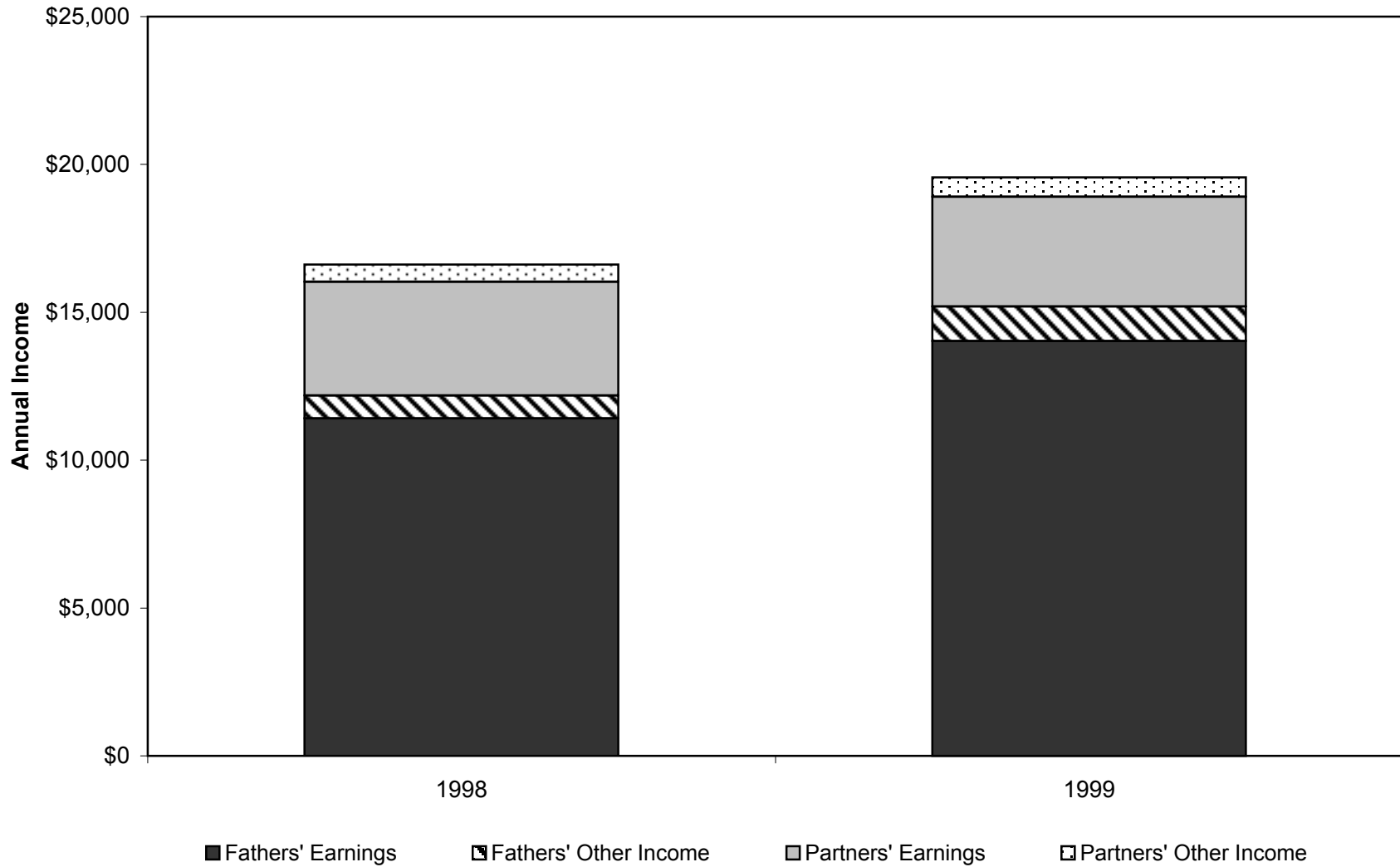
Is Child Support Impoverishing These Fathers?

The picture that emerges of fathers' resources shows substantial diversity. How well does the child support system take this diversity into account? Are a substantial number of fathers being impoverished by the child support they pay? Are fathers with higher incomes paying more than those with lower incomes? In this chapter, we use fathers' own reports of the amount of formal child support they paid. A discussion of the relationship between formal payments and informal cash and in-kind

¹⁷Administrative data include all legal fathers. The target sample for the survey included the father of a randomly selected focal child. Thus, the survey underrepresents fathers of children in multiple-father families receiving W-2. To test the sensitivity to this difference in sample definitions, we estimated earnings in administrative data only for fathers of the focal child. The figures are generally quite similar to those for all fathers. For example, in 1998, 37.0 percent of fathers of focal children had no earnings, compared with 38.3 percent of all fathers, and 4.6 percent of fathers in both samples had earnings over \$30,000.

¹⁸Because several fathers did not answer all income questions, the total sample of fathers with family income information is 460 in 1998 and 504 in 1999. We do not show subgroups because the sample size for some categories would be small.

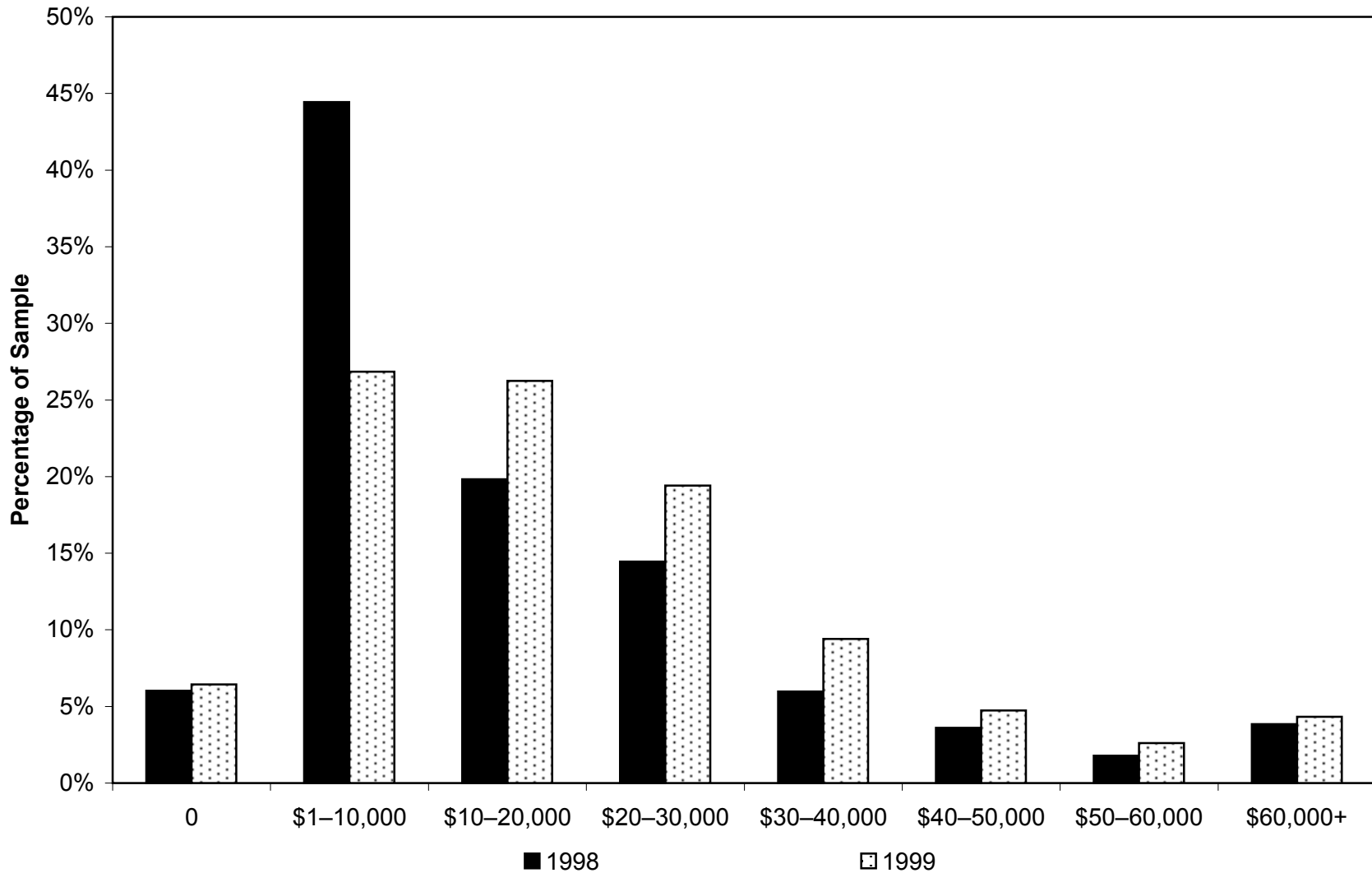
FIGURE 3
Fathers' Average Family Income



Source: Fathers' responses in the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families.

The sample includes 572 cases for 1998. Of these, 112 cases refused to answer or responded that they did not know. Thus, 460 cases were used for 1998. The sample includes 603 cases for 1999. Of these, 99 cases refused to answer or responded that they did not know. Thus, 504 cases were used for 1999.

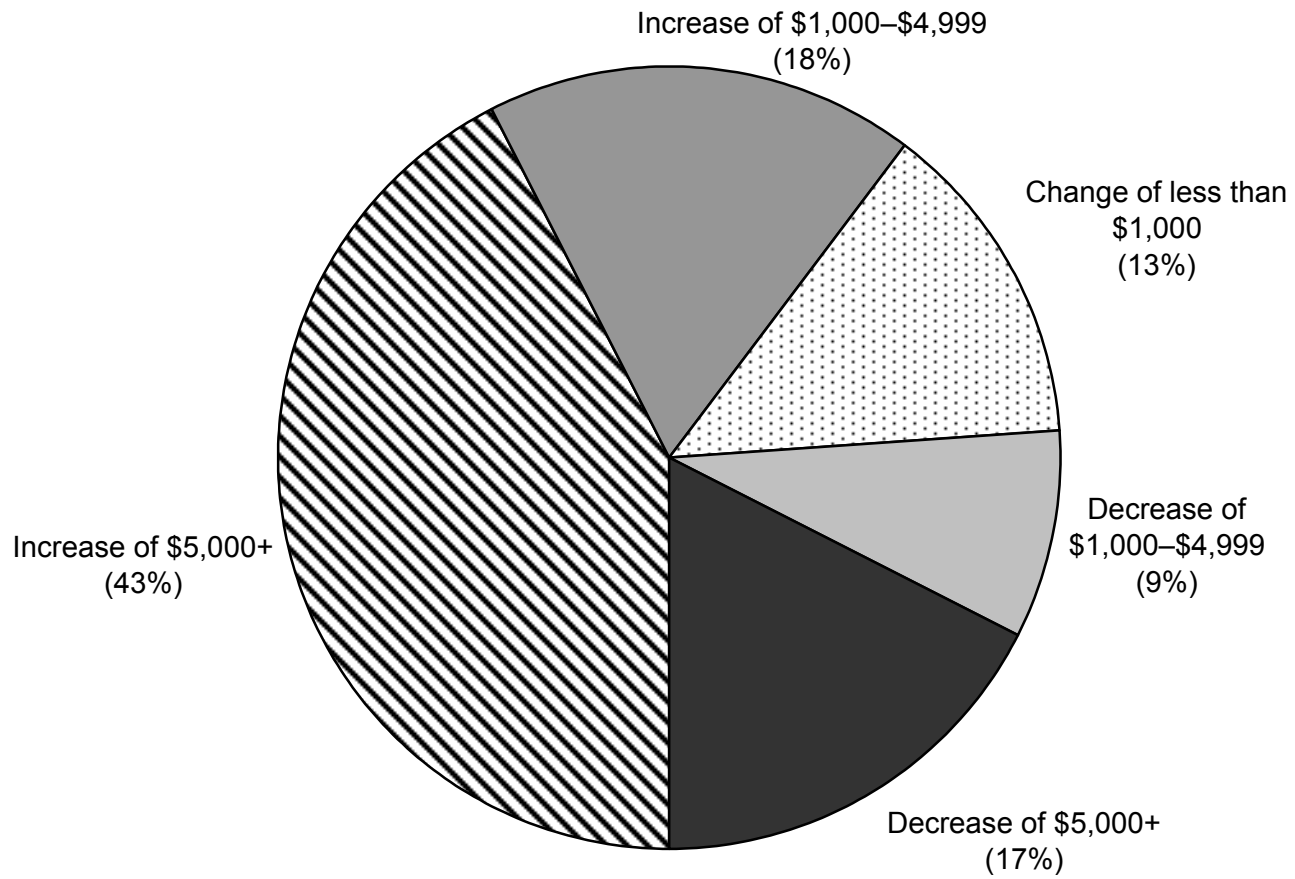
FIGURE 4
Distribution of Fathers' Family Income before Paying Child Support



Source: Fathers' responses in the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families.

The sample includes 572 cases for 1998. Of these, 112 cases refused to answer or responded that they did not know. Thus, 460 cases were used for 1998. The sample includes 603 cases for 1999. Of these, 99 cases refused to answer or responded that they did not know. Thus, 504 cases were used for 1999.

FIGURE 5
Changes in Family Income, 1998–1999



Source: Fathers' responses in the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families. 345 cases were interviewed in both 1998 and 1999. Of these, 85 cases did not provide income information. Thus, 260 cases were used.

supports, as well as other father involvement, is included in Seltzer and Schaeffer (2001). A more detailed examination of the types of fathers who pay support can be found in Bartfeld and Meyer (2001).

We begin by examining the proportion of fathers paying support by category of fathers' personal income in Figure 6. This figure shows the expected relationship between income and likelihood of paying—those with the least income are least likely to pay. We note, however, that the tendency for higher-income fathers to be more likely to pay seems to hold only for fathers with incomes up to \$20–30,000. Those in the highest income category (over \$30,000) are no more likely to pay than those with income of \$20–30,000.¹⁹ Figure 7 shows the average amount paid among those paying something. With the exception of those with no reported income,²⁰ there is generally a positive relationship between income and support paid. On average, however, lower-income fathers who pay support pay a higher proportion of their income.

Because our focus in this report is on the general context and payment patterns of nonresident fathers, the figures discussed here are based on a sample that includes fathers of children whose mothers are in the experimental group and fathers of children whose mothers are in the control group. The CSDE experimental impact evaluation found that fathers in the experimental group were more likely to pay support in both 1998 and 1999.²¹ There was also a significant increase in the amount paid in 1999.

A number of criteria could be used to evaluate the fairness of child support payments. One important issue is whether paying child support leads to the impoverishment of low-income nonresident fathers. We now turn to a comparison of poverty status before and after paying child support. To calculate poverty status, we compare the official poverty thresholds to our measure of family income.²² In 1998, the poverty rate for fathers before paying support was quite high, 43 percent. The situation improved substantially by 1999, but the rate was still quite high, 34 percent. Only a few fathers fell below the poverty threshold if child support was subtracted, as the poverty rate increased from 43 to 45 percent in 1998 and from 34 to 38 percent in 1999. The number of fathers who fell below a particular line owing to child support payments was fairly small, but this figure does not reflect the impact of child support payments made by fathers who were already poor and who became more impoverished as a result of paying support. Among those poor in 1998, 30 percent paid support, averaging \$1,860 among those who paid. While there were fewer fathers who were poor before paying child support in 1999, the percentage paying increased to 44 percent, and the average decreased to \$1,550.

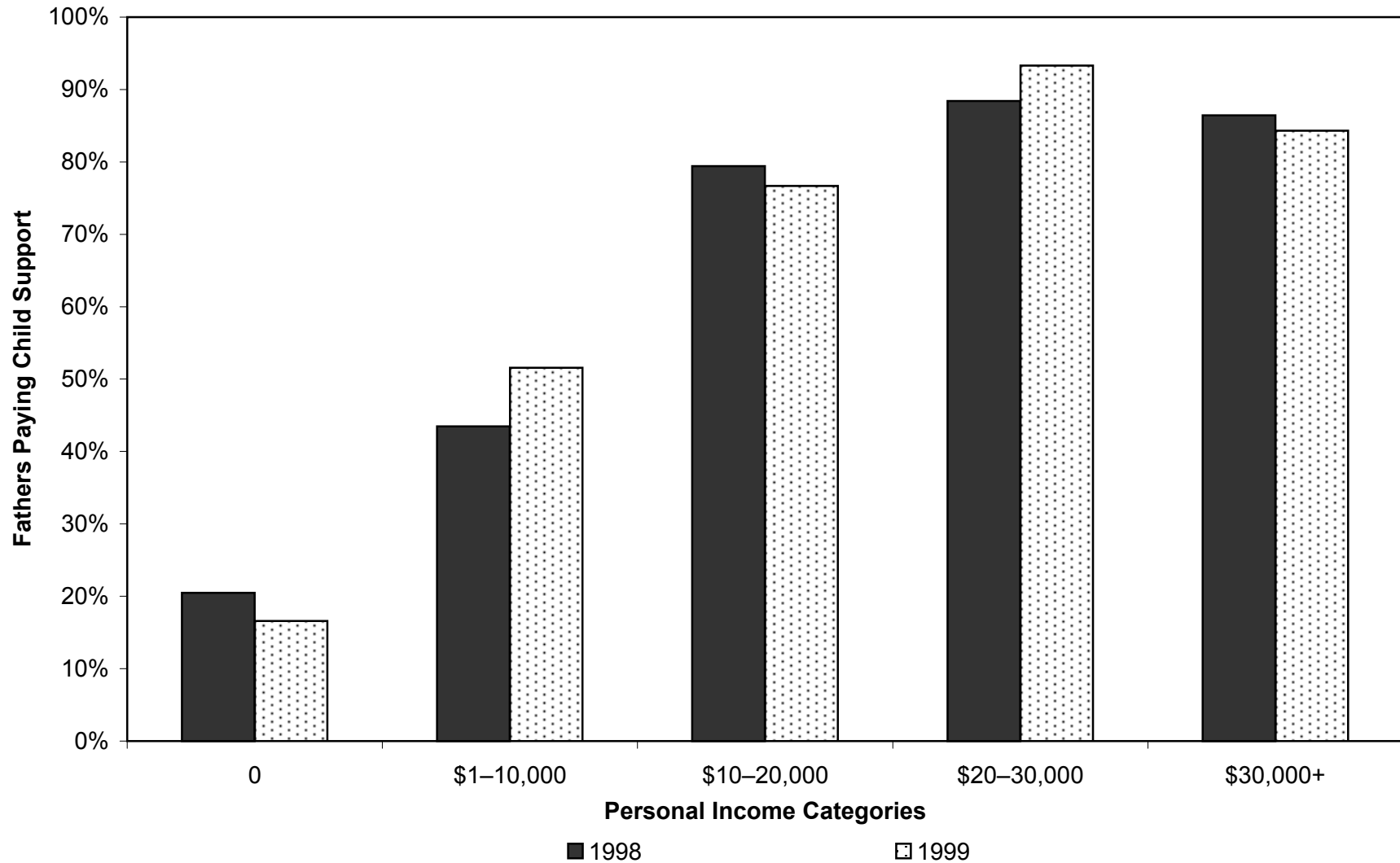
¹⁹Our sample includes only fathers of children in families participating in W-2. Nonresident fathers with higher income who pay support may be paying enough that their ex-partners would not be receiving W-2.

²⁰The few fathers who reported no personal income and also reported that they were paying child support (14 in 1998 and 11 in 1999) reported fairly high amounts of payment, perhaps because of reporting errors, perhaps because they are drawing down assets or using credit, or perhaps because they were relying on the incomes of others.

²¹For more details see Meyer and Cancian (2001), Section I.4.1. The experimental evaluation relied on administrative reports of the full administrative data sample, so the figures are not directly comparable.

²²The official poverty threshold varies with family size. For example, the poverty threshold for a family of one, two, or three in 1998 was \$8,050, \$10,850 and \$13,650 respectively. We calculate the number of people in the family, including the father, his spouse or partner (if he has one), and any children living in the household. We tested another measure that also counted any other adults in the father's household in the family size used to determine the poverty threshold. With this measure, poverty rates are slightly higher (49 percent in 1998 versus our base 43 percent; 38 percent in 1999 versus our base 34 percent). However, we believe this measure is less accurate, as it includes other adults in the calculation of family size but does not consider their incomes (not measured in our data) in the measure of family income.

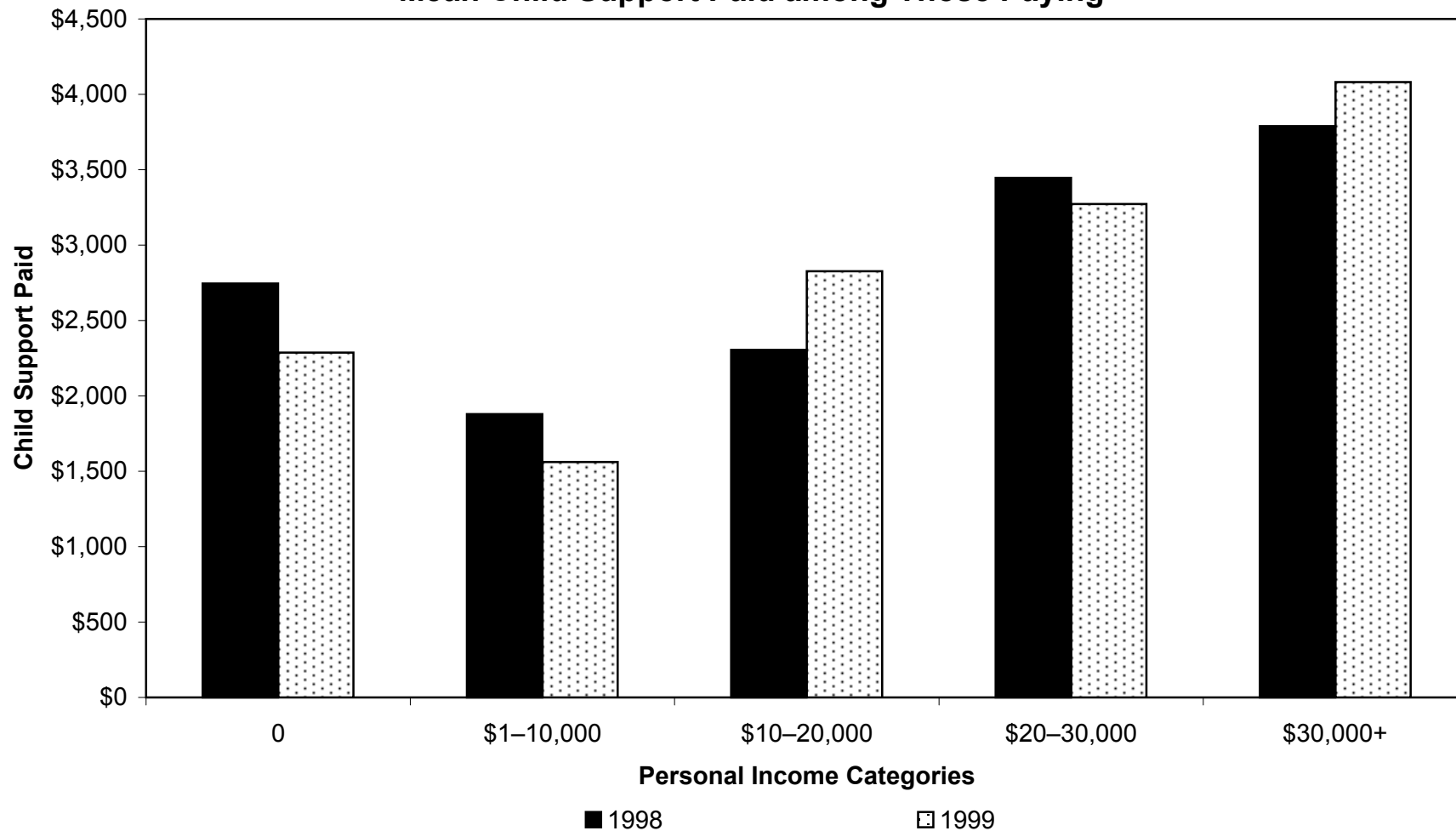
FIGURE 6
Percentage of Fathers Paying Child Support



Source: Fathers' responses in the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families.

The sample includes 572 cases for 1998. Of these, 49 did not provide income information. Among the remaining 523 cases, 35 did not provide child support information. Thus, 488 were used for 1998. The sample includes 603 cases for 1999. Of these, 59 cases did not provide income information. Among the remaining 544 cases, 31 cases did not provide child support information. Thus 513 cases were used for 1999.

FIGURE 7
Mean Child Support Paid among Those Paying



Source: Fathers' responses in the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families.

The sample includes 572 cases for 1998. Of these, 49 did not provide income information. Among the remaining 523 cases, 35 did not provide child support information. Thus, 488 were used for 1998. The sample includes 603 cases for 1999. Of these, 59 cases did not provide income information. Among the remaining 544 cases, 31 cases did not provide child support information. Thus 513 cases were used for 1999.

We have seen that a substantial number of these fathers have low incomes and that some of these low-income fathers then pay support. What types of economic hardships do they face? Figure 8 shows the percentages of fathers reporting various types of hardships. In 1998, 11 percent of fathers said they often or sometimes had not had enough to eat, 16 percent reported having their gas or electricity turned off, and 17 percent had moved in with others because they could not pay the rent. Relatively few of the fathers had lived in a shelter or were living on the street—though this type of hardship may be particularly underrepresented in our data, given the difficulty of locating and interviewing homeless fathers. About one-third of the fathers had spent some time without a phone. Most measures of hardship fell somewhat from 1998 to 1999. Considering all these hardships together, we find that 47 percent of fathers reported at least one hardship in 1998, compared with 44 percent in 1999.

We also asked these fathers if they had received help from private charities, churches, or community groups, including cash or vouchers to pay for rent, utilities, or telephone bills (about 4 percent), clothing or vouchers for clothing (2–6 percent), and food supplies or hot meals (10–14 percent). Thus, even though the figures reported for hardship are fairly high, only 13–15 percent of fathers reported receiving any help from charities, churches, or community groups.

Should We Expect More in Child Support from Fathers of Children in Families Receiving W-2?

We asked fathers how many biological or adopted children they had who were not living with them, then estimated the amount of child support they would be ordered to pay if the Wisconsin standard were applied to their reported personal income. The Wisconsin standard requires 17 percent of gross income for one child, 25 percent for two, 29 percent for three, 31 percent for four, and 34 percent for five or more children. The estimated order reflects a simplification in that the court has the discretion not to apply the standard if the father has very low income. Moreover, if the father had children with more than one woman, the total child support required by the standard would be higher, and if any child lived with him for at least 30 percent of the time, the amount required would be lower.²³

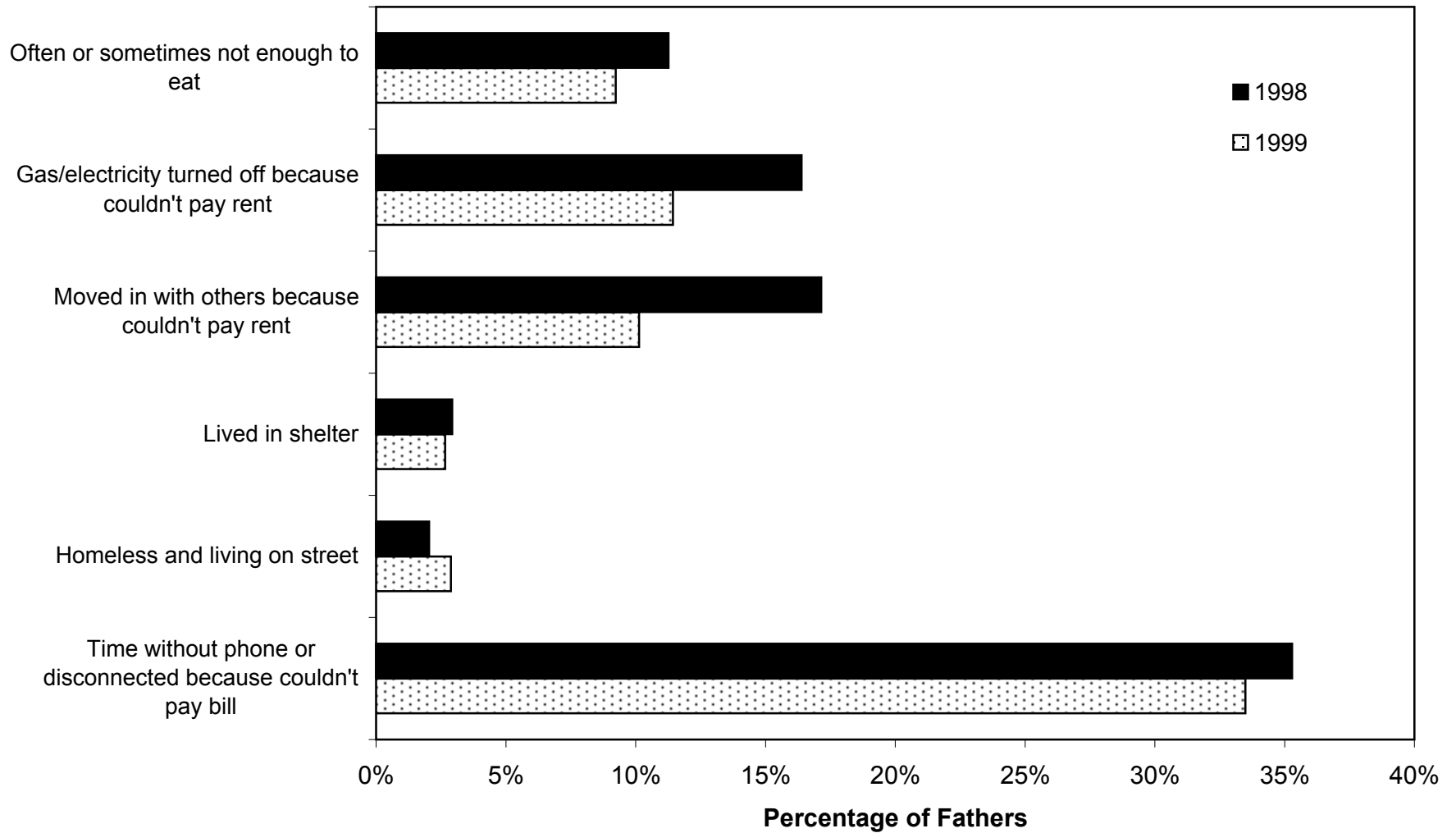
If this estimated order were actually paid by fathers of children in families receiving W-2, it would obviously affect their income and their poverty status. Evidence from the survey of fathers suggests that in 1998 the median personal income of nonresident fathers was \$8,000 before paying child support, and \$7,300 after paying support. If all fathers paid the potential child support amount, median income would decline to \$6,640, so the gap between actual support and potential support is \$660 at the median. Comparable figures for 1999 are median personal income of \$12,000 before paying support, \$10,997 after paying support, and \$9,750 if they paid potential support, for a gap of \$1,253. Poverty rates would also be affected by the payment of potential child support. As noted above, poverty rates for fathers in 1998 were 43 percent before paying and 45 percent after paying support. If fathers paid potential support, the poverty rate would rise further, to 48 percent. Comparable figures for 1999 are 34 percent, 38 percent, and 39 percent.

V. Implications

Recent welfare reforms aim to move poor families with children from welfare to self-sufficiency. Recognizing that many single mothers on welfare will face major obstacles in supporting their children on their own, the PRWORA legislation included measures aimed at increasing child support payments by

²³A father with two children with the same mother would owe 25 percent of his income. A father with two children with different mothers would owe 17 percent of his income for the first child, and then 17 percent of the remaining income to the second child, for a total of 31 percent ($.17 + .17 [1.00 - .17] = .3111$).

FIGURE 8
Economic Hardship of Fathers



Source: Fathers' responses in the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families.

The total sample includes 572 cases in 1998 and 603 cases in 1999. Almost all fathers answered all questions; the greatest nonresponse was 6 fathers who did not answer the question on food sufficiency in 1998.

nonresident fathers. In this paper we have not focused on the many ways fathers contribute to their children outside the child support system; a review of these can be found in Seltzer and Schaeffer (2001). We have used administrative and survey data to assess the situation and potential financial contributions of nonresident fathers of children whose mothers participated in Wisconsin's TANF program. Our results suggest that most of these fathers have limited economic resources, and, like the mothers of their children, often face substantial barriers to providing for themselves and their families. Median earnings are low, and over a third of these fathers have incomes below the poverty line.

Given the challenges they face, should low-income nonresident fathers be expected to contribute to the support of their children? With the limited potential for substantially increasing payments, is increased child support enforcement a reasonable strategy? In answering these questions it is important to recognize the radical change in context associated with PRWORA limits on cash assistance. In the absence of an entitlement to cash assistance for poor mothers and children, increasing support paid by nonresident fathers may be essential—even if these fathers are poor themselves. Although the poverty rates for fathers are quite high, and are made somewhat higher by the payment of child support, the poverty rates among mothers are substantially higher than those of fathers, even after child support is received. Among all mothers participating in W-2, the overall poverty rate after receiving child support was 76 percent in 1998 and 68 percent in 1999; for mothers of children who entered W-2 with legally established paternity—those most immediately eligible for support—poverty rates were 66 percent in 1998 and 63 percent in 1999. Forty-four percent of fathers reported at least one hardship in 1999—a substantial proportion, but lower than the 57 percent of mothers of children with legally established paternity who reported hardship in the same year.²⁴

The difficult economic situation of resident mothers may make child support a continued focus, but it is important to recognize its limitations. Overall, even were the Wisconsin standard applied in setting orders, and even were all orders paid in full, the median father would pay only about \$100/month in child support. Although this support could be an important contribution to self-sufficiency, it is not adequate to help many families relying on the earnings of a low-wage single mother to escape poverty. Continued public support is likely to be essential if these children and their parents are going to rise above the poverty level.

²⁴It is noteworthy that even with time-limited TANF benefits, resident mothers may have greater access to other income supports than many nonresident fathers. One policy of particular interest is the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). We calculated potential EITC payments for resident-mother and nonresident-father families. We found that if resident-mother families received the maximum estimated EITC, their poverty rate would fall from the pre-EITC rate of 76 percent to a post-EITC rate of 68 percent in 1998 and from a pre-EITC rate of 68 percent to 59 percent in 1999. The comparable figures for nonresident fathers (who may have higher family income due to the EITC if they or their new partners have resident children) suggest that the EITC has a more modest poverty reduction potential for these families—from 43 to 40 percent in 1998 and from 34 to 30 percent in 1999.

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