

# Executive Summary

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, and included substantial changes to the child support system. Although the political rhetoric suggested that nonresident fathers could be providing substantially more for their children, several factors lead to skepticism regarding the potential for considerable increases in child support collections from this population. This volume includes the results of two studies of the characteristics and experiences of fathers of children in families participating in W-2, Wisconsin's TANF program. Chapter 1 presents a portrait of nonresident fathers drawn from survey and administrative data. Chapter 2 presents the results of an ethnographic study of the life experiences of African American fathers with children on W-2.

## Chapter 1

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

This chapter summarizes information on the fathers of children receiving TANF in Wisconsin, using data from administrative sources, as well as from surveys of mothers and fathers. In addition to the basic demographic characteristics of these families, we report on fathers' family background, health, and financial resources and assets. We then present descriptive information on nonresident fathers' earnings and income, as well as poverty and economic hardship.

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. For example, among nonresident fathers of children whose families participate in W-2:

- about one-third have less than a high school diploma, and only one in five has education beyond high school.
- median earnings are low; a third to a half of fathers had annual family incomes under \$10,000 and only about one in ten had family incomes over \$40,000.
- over a third have income below the poverty line.
- seventeen percent reported either fair or poor health, and about one-fifth stated that they had a health problem that deterred work.
- home ownership is relatively uncommon, with nearly half the fathers renting, over one-quarter living with relatives, and another 6 percent living with friends.

Given the challenges they face, should low-income nonresident fathers be expected to contribute to the support of their children? We argue that in the absence of an entitlement to cash assistance for poor mothers and children, increasing support from nonresident fathers may be essential—even if these fathers are poor themselves. However, although the difficult economic situation of resident mothers may make child support a continued focus, it is important to recognize its limitations. Overall, even were the Wisconsin standard applied in setting orders, and even if all orders were paid in full, the average father among those studied here would pay only about \$100 per month in child support. While 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.

## Chapter 2

### **An Ethnographic Inquiry into the Life Experiences of African American Fathers with Children on W-2**

This chapter is based on two years of extensive face-to-face interviews with 36 noncustodial fathers of children who received public assistance from the state of Wisconsin. We interviewed African American fathers who lived in Milwaukee. The report discusses these fathers' characteristics, their conceptions of their role and their responsibilities toward their children, the barriers they face in managing their daily lives and in seeking employment, and their understanding of the child support system and its interactions with the Wisconsin Works (W-2) welfare program.

A distinctive feature of this study is that fathers in the sample were randomly selected from the state administrative data system. Intensive efforts were made to contact potential informants through letter writing, phone calls, home visits, and personal meetings with other family members. The final sample consisted of 25 noncustodial fathers chosen from the pool of eligible fathers at large, and 11 fathers who had, in addition, taken part in the Children First program, a court-ordered program to provide work experience and training to unemployed and underemployed noncustodial parents who were unable to meet their child support obligations. This second group was selected because there was particular interest in obtaining data on fathers who had participated in job search and job training programs.

Data for both groups were collected in a semistructured interview with each father, lasting anywhere from 45 minutes to 3 hours, between April 1999 and June 2000. A second wave of interviews with 16 of the fathers was completed by April 2001. Assurance of the confidentiality of the information was a high priority, in order to gain the trust of the parents and to encourage them to talk openly about their life experiences, their family relationships, and the ways, legal and illegal, in which they gained income.

Almost all fathers were involved with their children, but to differing degrees. All but two of the noncustodial fathers had been in telephone or physical contact with at least one of their children in the three months before the interview. Their efforts to do so were complicated by the fact that 22 of the men (over 60 percent) had children by more than one woman. But fathers, and members of their families and communities, assumed they had a responsibility to be involved with their children, both financially and emotionally. Most of these men aspired to be good fathers.

The extent of fathers' involvement with their children can be categorized in four ways: 6 of the fathers had custody/physical placement (formal) and 7 had informal custody of a child, 10 were frequent visitors, 6 were regular visitors, and 7 had occasional contact. Fathers with multiple children might have different levels of involvement with different children, often depending on whether the relationship with the mother was congenial or unpleasant. Some of the men were involved in relationships of long standing, and over the two years of the study, 11 fathers cohabited with the mothers of at least one of their children. At the time of the interviews, 15 of the fathers were living with a girlfriend, who was sometimes the mother of one of their children, and to different degrees they shared the responsibility for the household, which in some cases included the girlfriend's child(ren) by another father. Over half of the men considered it their responsibility to act as fathers to the nonbiological children who lived with them. Several also were responsible for the well-being of parents.

Of the 36 fathers, 25 held jobs at the time of the first interview (three of the unemployed were disabled recipients of SSDI). Their educational level was low: 25 percent of the fathers had some college, 42 percent had completed high school, and 33 percent had dropped out of high school. The men held full- or part-time jobs as painters, maintenance workers, meatpackers, child care workers, and fast food

workers, and their average wage was \$7 an hour. A large majority had worked or were working for temporary placement agencies. Most of these jobs did not hold out much prospect of advancement or future income growth. Some fathers participated in the informal economy, doing auto repair or yard work for direct cash payment, and in a few cases drug trafficking. Many fathers cited race/class prejudice and discrimination (in particular by law enforcement officers and by employers in the suburbs) as a barrier to employment.

Housing instability and interaction with the criminal justice system most strongly affected fathers' ability to maintain stable and continuous employment. Most could not afford an apartment on their own, often because of low wages and child support obligations. Some received assistance from family members, or lived on and off with their mothers; sometimes the grandparent and other relatives provided child care while fathers worked. Others lived with girlfriends but were not listed on the lease. Involvement with the courts was a serious impediment to adequate employment; by the end of the study, 33 out of 36 fathers had a civil or criminal charge against them, ranging from traffic violations to assault and battery. Eleven of the fathers had been incarcerated at some point for nonpayment of child support.

Many of these fathers did not understand the basics of the child support system. They did not know that an order of paternity establishment led to a child support order, understand the procedures for modifying orders, or know how to initiate legal actions. Nor did they know that women seeking assistance were required to cooperate with the child support agency and assign payments to the state as a prerequisite to cash assistance. The great majority had not heard about the pass-through waiver or its benefits to those paying child support for children on welfare in Wisconsin. Nor were they aware of the existence of the Children First program or other services for men in Milwaukee. For those who participated, Children First was seen as very helpful because of the staff, the ancillary services, and the job placement services it offered.

Fathers did have a better understanding of the child support enforcement tools, but in general viewed the child support system as hostile. They expressed willingness to participate if they could be assured that their support more directly benefitted their children. Their understanding of the monthly statement of child support received and disbursed that was sent to them ranged from minimal to zero. This lack of understanding and their generally poor employment opportunities often led to the accumulation of large arrearages, because many of the fathers did not distinguish the child support order from other expenses or monthly bills they were unable to pay. Arrearages for fathers in the study ranged from \$1,500 to over \$30,000; for some, the amount of child support debt to the state was so high that many of the dollars paid by fathers would not directly benefit the children, even with the full pass-through. Fathers were confused and sometimes angered by the withholding of support paid because of arrears owed to the state or by the extent of wage garnishment to meet child support obligations and arrears.

A number of policy implications emerge from the findings. This research:

- highlights the importance of efforts to develop programs to renegotiate or reduce child support arrearages.
- suggests that the benefits of the pass-through policy are undermined by the amount of debt that men owe from previous AFDC arrears.
- suggests that policymakers consider the actual impact of assignment of child support on the personal relationships and income of poor parents.

- makes it clear that fathers often do not understand the child support system. Among other responses, policymakers, legal professionals and the judicial system need to study the use and availability of effective “pro se” forms, for example for modifying child support orders.