

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. The main program that had provided cash assistance to single-parent families for over sixty 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, emphasizes work, and establishes a lifetime time limit on cash assistance. The new welfare programs also reflect an increased focus on the responsibilities of nonresident fathers to provide for their children. PRWORA and related legislation included a variety of changes to improve child support enforcement, and to provide employment and related services to nonresident fathers so that they might be better able to meet child support obligations.

One feature of Wisconsin's efforts to improve the child support and welfare systems was the implementation of a full pass-through and disregard of child support collected on behalf of families participating in Wisconsin's TANF program, W-2.¹ Financing for the full pass-through and disregard required a federal waiver, and a requirement of the waiver was to conduct an evaluation, the Child Support Demonstration Evaluation (CSDE), of this policy change. The CSDE includes an experimental evaluation (for which Phase 1 results were reported in Meyer and Cancian, 2001), a set of non-experimental evaluations of pass-through policy (discussed in the first and third volumes of this report), and an examination of the experiences of nonresident fathers, reported here.

In Chapter 1 of this volume we provide a brief report on nonresident fathers of children participating in W-2. This analysis is designed in part to provide background for the ethnographic research that follows. As described in greater detail below, we use data from administrative records, as well as from the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families. Our reliance on these data sources has important implications. Administrative data allow us to analyze only a limited set of characteristics of nonresident fathers. However, for those aspects we can address, we have the advantage of being able to include information on all legal fathers (those with paternity established), giving us confidence that our results,

The CSDE includes experimental and nonexperimental components. A previous report presented results from the experimental evaluation for the first cohort of cases. This three-volume report includes results from the nonexperimental analyses.

- Volume I summarizes and compares the experimental evaluation and three quantitative nonexperimental studies.
- This volume reports on fathers of children in W-2 families, and features findings from an ethnographic study.
- Volume III includes the full quantitative nonexperimental studies summarized in Volume I.

¹Under AFDC, states were required to pass through to the family the first \$50 per month of child support collected, and to disregard this amount in calculating AFDC benefits. Under TANF, states could set their own policies for passing through and disregarding any child support paid on behalf of children on cash assistance, and were required only to withhold the federal share of child support collected. Under the new rules, most states chose to pass no money collected to the resident parent. In 1997, Wisconsin received a waiver from federal rules allowing it to pass through the entire amount of support collected to the resident parent, and to disregard all child support in calculating TANF cash payments. One requirement of the waiver was to conduct an evaluation of this policy change, the Child Support Demonstration Evaluation (CSDE). A key component of the CSDE is a random-assignment experimental evaluation: although most parents in the state receive the full amount of child support paid on their behalf (the experimental group), a randomly selected group of parents (the control group) receives only a portion of what is paid.

while limited in detail, are representative of all fathers. In Chapter 1 we also include information from the Survey of Wisconsin Works Families. The survey provides more detailed information and, while low response rates for the survey of fathers² reduce our ability to generalize from the survey data, the availability of administrative data for all fathers provides a basis to reweight the data in an attempt to account for differential nonresponse. Thus, the data allow us to offer a portrait of fathers' experience which covers a limited set of issues, but which captures some aspects of the experience of all legal fathers of the children in our W-2 sample.

In contrast, the ethnographic research reported in Chapter 2 provides a much more detailed discussion of fathers' experiences than is possible using administrative or survey data. As discussed in Chapter 2, in-depth, semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to learn about important features of fathers' lives that cannot be captured by a standard survey. The advantages of the ethnographic approach derive in part from the ethnographer's ability to collect more detailed information about the complexity of fathers' lives. Another essential advantage is that the more flexible approach of this research allows respondents to explain the importance of factors that may not have been initially apparent to the researchers—and thus would not have been reflected in a formal survey. The detailed responses available from ethnographic research also allow the researcher to discern how variables work together in the experience of these men. For example, the ethnographer may gain a better understanding of how unemployment, housing problems, and behavior toward children are interrelated, and how problems in one area can cause problems in another. The ethnographic research reported here concerns many of the same issues addressed by other parts of the evaluation, but provides the details and depth that allow a fuller understanding of the situations of a group of nonresident fathers.

A key limitation of the ethnographic approach is the difficulty of generalizing from the experiences of a small group of respondents to a broader population. The research discussed here employed a number of strategies to address this concern. As described in detail in Chapter 2, most of the fathers interviewed for the ethnographic component were selected from a random sample drawn from administrative data. However, since only a minority of the fathers drawn were successfully located and agreed to participate, concerns about representativeness remain. In part to address these concerns, the report on the ethnographic research includes a comparison of the characteristics of the initial sample drawn and the final respondents included, based on administrative data available for both groups. The analysis provided in the Chapter 1 also serves to provide context for the ethnographic research that follows.

²Among all fathers in the sample 33 percent were interviewed in each wave. Completion rates for fathers in the random subsample eligible for telephone and in-person interviews were higher—43 and 46 percent for the first and second waves.