Chapter 3
Paternity Establishment and Child Support Orders among W-2 Participants

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In an era of time-limited public assistance, policymakers and politicians frequently express the hope that a stronger private child support system can replace income that has, in the past, been provided to low-income single parents through the public welfare system.[1] At the same time, some critics fault the welfare system for not allowing parents to combine public assistance with private child support. Under Wisconsin's welfare replacement program, known as Wisconsin Works, or W-2, this is no longer the case. In addition to any assistance received from W-2, participants are also allowed to keep all child support paid on their behalf. Child support should, therefore, be a more important supplemental income source for families receiving public assistance in Wisconsin than in other states, where most child support paid on behalf of families receiving public assistance is retained by the state to offset welfare payments.

Many factors may nonetheless limit the importance of child support for the welfare population. First, many welfare clients do not have a legally identified father for their child(ren), and thus cannot receive formal child support. Second, child support orders may be low or nonexistent. Third, existing support orders are frequently not paid. Finally, all of these factors are compounded by the low incomes of many noncustodial parents in this population.

Existing research indicates that a substantial share of mothers who receive welfare, both in Wisconsin and nationwide, fail to receive child support, but that when support is received it is an important source of supplemental income. For instance, data from the 1998 Child Support Supplement to the Current Population Survey indicates that only 28 percent of child-support-eligible mothers who received welfare during the year also reported child support income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In Wisconsin, child support receipt among W-2 recipients is somewhat more common but still not the norm; 39 percent received support during the first year following program entry and 46 percent during the second year (see Volume II, Chapter 2). However, child support receipts are high enough to make a difference in the lives of those who receive them. The average monthly support received, among mothers who received any, ranged from $170 to $200 during the eight quarters after W-2 entry (see Volume II, Chapter 2).

In light of the time-limited nature of public support for low-income single parents, it is critical that policymakers maximize the capacity of the child support system to provide a supplemental source of income. Although the full pass-through is an important step, its potential is limited by the large numbers of welfare clients who have no support paid on their behalf. To enhance the capacity of child support as an income source for this population, we must identify the relative importance of the various stages at which parents "fall out" of the child support system, as well as key groups most likely to fall out at each stage. Systematic data on where the process breaks down will allow policymakers to better target their efforts to strengthen the child support system.

This chapter examines the stages at which potential child support is lost to welfare recipients in Wisconsin. We address the following specific questions:

1.   Where are welfare recipients in the child support process at the time they enter W-2—and how does this differ when we focus on individual children versus on mothers as the unit of analysis?

2.   To what extent do children progress through the intermediate stages of the system—that is, paternity and order establishment—during the two years after entering W-2?

3.   Which children are most likely to successfully navigate the child support system, both before and after W-2 entry?

This chapter makes several important contributions to existing knowledge about child support outcomes. First, we focus on welfare clients in the post-AFDC era, which provides timely evidence about persistent gaps in child support for this population. The increasing attention paid to child support over time and the heightened emphasis on ensuring child support as an alternative income source to public assistance make these findings particularly informative from a policy standpoint. Second, we focus on *both* of the key interim steps in the child support system—paternity establishment and support orders—thus providing a clearer and more integrated picture of gaps in the system than has thus far been available. Third, we explicitly illustrate the importance of considering child support outcomes on behalf of *all children in the household*, in order to fully understand the magnitude of gaps in the child support system. Overall, our results tell a story of persistent gaps in child support stemming from breakdowns at both of the key interim steps. These gaps are greater than is apparent when focusing on summary outcomes at the level of the mother, and children's progress over a two-year period is fairly limited.

There are important questions about child support orders which are not addressed here. We do not focus in depth on the magnitude of support orders, nor do we address the question of whether orders constitute an appropriate share of noncustodial income. Both are issues we will be exploring in subsequent work.

Background and Prior Research

Child support has always been an unpredictable source of income for single-parent families. Despite over two decades of policy attention, U.S. Census Bureau data indicate that only 35 percent of child support-eligible mothers received child support during 1998; outcomes were even worse among mothers most likely to be affected by welfare reform. For instance, only one-quarter of poor mothers who were eligible and only 22 percent of never-married mothers received child support (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Although lack of child support is often portrayed in the popular press as a compliance problem—that is, a problem stemming from failure to pay support obligations—the reality is more complicated. Receipt of child support is a multistep process, and parents fall out at multiple points along the way. In the case of nonmarital children, there are three key steps: a legal father must be identified, a support order must be issued, and support must be collected.

Over the past two decades, policymakers have targeted all stages of the child support process—including paternity establishment, support orders, and enforcement of those orders. Because this paper focuses on the intermediate stages—establishing paternity and support orders—we provide a brief overview of policy evolution and current knowledge related to those outcomes.

<u>Paternity Establishment and Child Support Orders: A Brief Policy Overview</u>

In order to be eligible for child support, children born outside of marriage must first have a father legally identified—a process known as establishing paternity. Beginning in the 1980's and continuing

through the landmark welfare reform legislation in 1996, federal legislation has sought to increase the number of nonmarital children for whom paternity is established. Such legislation has tackled paternity establishment on two fronts—by obligating states to develop procedures to facilitate paternity establishment in contested cases, and by enabling and encouraging voluntary establishment through simple civil procedures.

The Child Support Enforcement Amendments of 1984 obligated states to allow paternity establishment until a child's 18th birthday. In 1988, the Family Support Act introduced several additional provisions to promote paternity establishment, including mandated genetic testing in disputed cases and increased use of civil procedures for establishing paternity. Provisions were further strengthened in 1993, including requirements that states implement expedited procedures to establish paternity in contested cases, requirements for increased interstate cooperation with regard to paternity establishment, and financial penalties for states not meeting paternity establishment goals. Among the most important of the 1993 provisions was the requirement that states implement a simple civil procedure for the voluntary establishment of paternity, including the development of a hospital-based program to facilitate voluntary paternity acknowledgment at birth. Several of these provisions were strengthened yet again in 1996, including barriers to the revocation of voluntary establishments (Committee on Ways and Means, 2000).

The emphasis on paternity establishment is intended to lead to a higher rate of support orders on behalf of nonmarital children. Other federal legislation has focused on support orders more directly. For instance, the 1984 child support amendments required states to implement administrative or quasijudicial processes to establish support orders, in an effort to speed up the process by which orders are issued and enforced. The amendments likewise obligated states to develop advisory child support guidelines, with subsequent legislation in 1988 requiring that such guidelines be presumptive (Committee on Ways and Means, 2000).

Paternity Establishment and Child Support Orders: What Do We Currently Know?

How effective have these policies been? Good national estimates of the share of nonmarital children for whom paternity has been established are not available. However, the evidence is encouraging. Nationwide, the total number of paternity establishments increased by 199 percent between 1992 and 1999, and more than 1.5 million paternities were established during 1999 (U.S. Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2000). In-hospital and other voluntary acknowledgments have contributed tremendously to this trend. There were at least 614,000 voluntary acknowledgments during 1999, an increase of over 600 percent in a four-year period (Committee on Ways and Means, 2000). More paternities are being established per year than there are nonmarital births, indicating that progress is being made against the current stock of children without a legal father (U.S. Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2000). A recent study by Sorensen and Halpern (1999) credits in-hospital paternity establishment policies with contributing to the increase in child support collections on the part of never-married mothers. Not surprisingly given these trends, the prevalence of support orders among never-married mothers has increased dramatically, from 7.8 percent in 1979 to 36.6 percent in 1996 (Beller and Graham, 2000).

Despite these improvements, it is clear that many children continue to slip through the gaps in the child support system. The most recent data from the Current Population Survey indicate that just over half (53 percent) of custodial mothers have a child support order, with lower rates among never-married mothers (40 percent) and those receiving cash assistance (48 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In the case of never-married mothers, the low order rate includes those who have not had paternity established for their children, as well as those who have paternity established but no orders. The two cannot be distinguished, making it difficult to assess the extent to which lack of orders constitute a distinct problem

from absence of legal fathers. Data from Wisconsin indicate that among cases which came to court during the 1980's, nonmarital children who had paternity established were as likely to eventually get a support order as were divorced children (Meyer and Bartfeld, 1993).

Data from the Child Support Enforcement Office provide further evidence on child support gaps, particularly vis-á-vis the public assistance caseload. Nationwide, 59 percent of the nonmarital children on the IV-D caseload had a legal father in 1999, and 60 percent of IV-D cases (including marital and nonmarital children) had a support order (U.S. Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2000).[2] In Wisconsin, paternity was established for 76–80 percent of nonmarital children on the IV-D caseload, considerably higher than the national averages for the corresponding years (U.S. Office of Child Support Enforcement, 1999).

Although paternity and order establishment are key steps leading up to receipt of child support, we know little about the factors associated with these outcomes in the current policy environment. Seltzer (1999) uses national data to explore the factors associated with paternity establishment among children born before 1988, and finds higher rates of establishment among children whose mothers are white, have higher educational attainment, who are cohabiting with the child's father at birth, and who have multiple children with the father; there is no difference according to the mother's age at birth. These findings describe paternity establishment in an era which largely preceded recent policy developments. The findings are broadly consistent with analyses of support orders during the same general period. For instance, Beller and Graham (1993) and Hanson and colleagues (1996) document a higher likelihood of support orders among better-educated mothers and among whites; both studies focus on outcomes during the 1980's.

This chapter builds on prior work by examining paternity establishment and child support orders in the post-AFDC era. We provide new information about the extent to which welfare recipients are able to successfully navigate the child support system, including a careful look at which children are most likely to be successful at each of the interim stages.

Data

We use administrative data from the W-2 and child support systems to examine child support outcomes. We focus on child-support-eligible mothers who entered W-2 during the first 9 months of the program, that is, from October 1997 through June 1998. W-2 applicants during this period were randomly assigned to one of two policy regimes with regard to child support. Those in the experimental group were to receive a full pass-through of all child support paid on their behalf, whereas those in the control group were to receive a reduced pass-through during months in which they received cash assistance; the remainder of their support would be used to reimburse the state for welfare payments. Because we are interested in examining child support outcomes in the context of a full pass-through, we exclude control-group cases (i.e., those who receive a reduced pass-through) from our sample.[3] The

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[2]The IV-D caseload (named for the relevant section of the Social Security Act) includes all who receive child support services through the Child Support Enforcement Office. The majority of clients, but not all, are current or past recipients of cash assistance.

[3]All descriptive results are weighted to adjust for the differential rate of assignment to the experimental versus nonexperimental groups over the nine-month period. All multivariate results include dummy variables to control for the assignment rate.

majority of our sample entered the program during the first six months, frequently by transferring from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

Our sample includes mothers receiving cash assistance as well as those receiving case management and/or noncash assistance only. We exclude women who qualified for W-2 case management services because they were pregnant but who had no children when they entered the program. We also exclude women whose youngest child was age 16 or over at the time of W-2 entry. Finally, we exclude women who were not eligible for child support because there were no living noncustodial fathers or because there was a "good cause" exemption, that is, the child support agency had determined not to pursue support because of potential danger to the mother or child(ren).

A high proportion of these women had more than one child—indeed, more than 40 percent of them had three or more children. Overall, the 15,241 mothers in our sample were associated with 35,060 children at the time of W-2 entry. The great majority of those children were born outside marriage; 87 percent of the children had nonmarital fathers, for whom paternity needs to be legally established at the time of the birth or later in order for child support to be collected.

Analyses

In examining child support outcomes, the appropriate unit of analysis is not always apparent. For instance, support orders can be examined from the standpoint of individual children (who may or may not be covered by an order), noncustodial parents (who may or may not owe support), or custodial parents (who may or may not have a support obligation covering their children).

Here, we primarily focus on child support outcomes at the level of the child. We describe progress in the child support system by examining whether children have a legal father, whether they are covered by a support order, and whether they have support paid on their behalf. These steps are sequential, and a parent can fail to receive support because of a breakdown at any of these points.[4] We focus on children because this is the unit of analysis which is most conducive to examining both legal fathers and support orders, and we are interested in examining these outcomes in a coordinated fashion. Furthermore, focusing on individual children is the most accurate way to identify gaps in the system. Existing research focusing on custodial or noncustodial parents as the unit of analysis fails to acknowledge that parents can be at different places in the child support process with different children. We illustrate this here by aggregating across children to describe custodial parents' progress through the child support system on behalf of all their children, noting the varying progress when there are multiple children eligible for child support in a household.

Next, we present both descriptive and multivariate analyses to identify the factors associated with establishment of paternity and support orders. We examine these outcomes at two points in time: the time of W-2 entry (the baseline) and just over two years later. We estimate bivariate probit models, with the dependent variable coded 1 in the event the child support outcome (paternity or order establishment) is achieved, and coded 0 in the event the outcome is not achieved. As is typical with research on child support outcomes, we treat the events of paternity and order establishment sequentially, examining the correlates of support orders among the subset of children who have a legal father identified.

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[4]Note that we do not address two additional points at which potential support is lost: orders which fall below support guidelines, and lack of full payment. The latter is addressed in Volume II, Chapter 2. We hope to address the former in subsequent work.

Finally, we consider the factors associated with having a support order by two years after W-2 entry, considering the direct effect as well as indirect effects which occur via an impact on the intermediate step of establishing paternity. We include all children in this analysis, including those with and without legal fathers and orders at W-2 entry. Thus, the coefficients reflect the net impact of the independent variables, where the influence of these variables could occur before or after W-2 entry, and where the influence could occur in part through an impact on the intermediate step of paternity establishment. We illustrate the importance of the variables by calculating the predicted probability of having a support order by two years after W-2 entry for a variety of prototypical children, based on our final model.

Our analyses are based on a conceptual framework which posits that participation in the formal child support system is jointly influenced by fathers' preferences, mothers' preferences, and the preferences and practices of the state.[5]

We expect a father's preferences to be linked to his anticipated ability to maintain formal support payments, his expectation that support will benefit his child(ren), and to the strength of ties between the father and the custodial mother and child(ren). Qualitative research with low-income fathers clearly illustrates how concerns about being able to comply with potential support obligations contribute to a reluctance to participate in the formal support system (e.g., Waller and Plotnick, 2001). Research also highlights fathers' reluctance to participate in the formal support system when support payments are used to reimburse the state for welfare costs rather than to benefit the child(ren) (Edin, 1995; Waller and Plotnick, 2001). Consistent with the findings of such qualitative research, the evaluation documented that the full pass-through in Wisconsin had a positive impact on paternity establishment among fathers whose partners were new to the welfare system (see Volume I, Chapter 4). Existing research also suggests that fathers are more likely to establish paternity when parents have a close relationship with each other, as evidenced by cohabitation, subsequent marriage, or multiple children together (Seltzer, 1999).

Mothers' preferences should also influence the likelihood of participating in the formal child support system. We expect these preferences to be linked to the amount of formal support the mother would receive, the costs associated with getting that support, and prevailing norms at the time the child was born. Mothers who expect to get little in the way of formal support, or for whom formal support would result in a loss of informal support and/or public assistance, would have less incentive to participate in the formal support system. Likewise, mothers who have a view of unmarried parenting which does not involve the establishment of paternity for children may be less inclined to pursue paternity.

Finally, we expect that parents' participation in the child support system will be influenced by the degree of decision-making authority the state holds in a particular case, as well as by specific policies and practices which promote participation. We discuss the specific variables in the model in more detail when we present our results.

Results

How Far Have Children Progressed in the Child Support Process at the Time of W-2 Entry?

Figure II.3.1 illustrates the extent to which children had progressed through the child support system at the time their mothers entered the W-2 program. Of all the children in our sample, 61 percent

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[5]This is broadly consistent with general economic models of child support such as discussed in Beller and Graham (1993).

Figure II.3.1
Where Do Children Fall out in Child Support Process, as of 1st Quarter on W-2?

Total Children
N=35,060

No legal father
39%

Legal father
61%

No support order
36%
(22% of total)

Support order
64%
(39% of total)

No payment
64%
(25% of total)

Payment
36%
(14% of total)
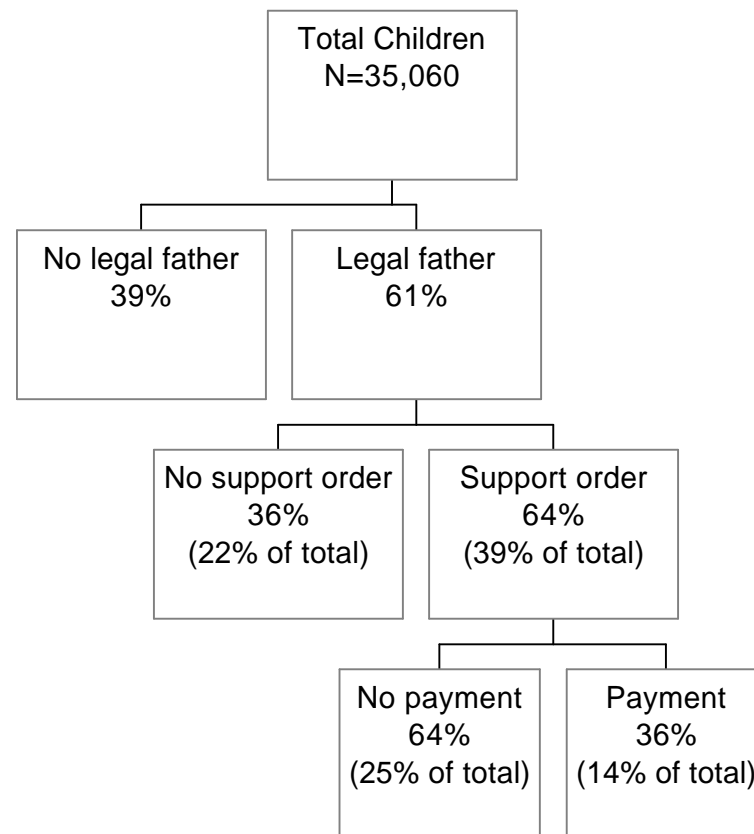
had a legally identified father when they entered the program. Of these children, 78 percent had been born outside marriage, and their fathers had formally established paternity. The remaining 22 percent had parents who were separated or divorced, and for whom identification of a legal father was automatic. Of all the children with legal fathers, 64 percent (only 39 percent of all children entering W-2) had been awarded child support and were at a point where they could be receiving formal support payments. Finally, of the subset owed child support, only 36 percent (14 percent of all the children in the sample) had a payment made on their behalf during the quarter they entered W-2.[6] These statistics clearly illustrate the large contribution made by failures at the intermediate steps of paternity establishment and order establishment to lack of child support payment.

How Do Mothers Fare in the Child Support Process, Considering All Their Children?

For most of this chapter, we treat individual children as our unit of analysis. Here, however, we highlight the distinction between a child-level versus mother-level analysis by describing how *mothers* fare in the child support system when we consider *all* of their children. As is apparent from these results, it is common for a mother to be at different points in the child support process for different children—and almost 60 percent of these mothers have two or more children. Table II.3.1 illustrates the implications of treating mothers instead of children as the unit of analysis, while still focusing on outcomes during the quarter of W-2 entry.

Several stories emerge from these results. On the one hand, having multiple children provides mothers with multiple opportunities for successful support outcomes. This is clearly indicated by comparing the situation of children at each step to that of mothers. For example, only 61 percent of children have a legal father, whereas 73 percent of mothers have at least one child with a legal father. Likewise, 39 percent of children are covered by a support order, whereas 57 percent of mothers have a support order for at least one child. Finally, 14 percent of children have support paid on their behalf, whereas 24 percent of mothers receive at least some support. From this standpoint, support outcomes appear to be more favorable when the mother rather than the child is the unit of analysis.

On the other hand, having multiple children also provides multiple opportunities for losing potential child support, a fact routinely ignored in the literature on child support outcomes. Mothers are much less likely to have successful child support outcomes on behalf of *all* their children than to have successful outcomes on behalf of *any* children. This is illustrated by the following statistics in Table II.3.1: only 44 percent of mothers have a legal father for each of their children, as compared to 73 percent with a legal father for at least one child; 24 percent have an order on behalf of each of their children, as compared to 57 percent with an order for at least one child; and a strikingly low 8 percent have support paid on behalf of each of their children during the quarter of W-2 entry, as compared to 24 percent who receive support for at least one child. In short, even when mothers successfully navigate the child support system with one child, they are often not able to do so with all of them. As child support statistics are routinely reported at the level of custodial parents, without considering different outcomes among multiple children (see, e.g., U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), such statistics may paint an overoptimistic picture of the effectiveness of the child support system.

The complexity of describing child support outcomes from the standpoint of custodial mothers is shown in Figure II.3.2, which illustrates the multiple points at which a single mother can lose potential

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[6]The data do not allow us to explicitly link payments to individual children. We assume that if a noncustodial parent makes a support payment on behalf of a particular custodial parent, that payment covers all of the couple's children who are covered by an order.

Table II.3.1
Child Support Outcomes for Children and Mothers during Quarter of Entry to W-2

	Children	Mothers (Any Children)	Mothers (All Children)
Legal Father	60.6%	72.8%	43.5%
Support Order	38.9	57.2	23.8
Payment	14.2	24.2	8.1

Sample: 35,060 children linked to 15,241 mothers.

Figure II.3.2
Gaps in Child Support for Mothers during Quarter of W-2 Entry
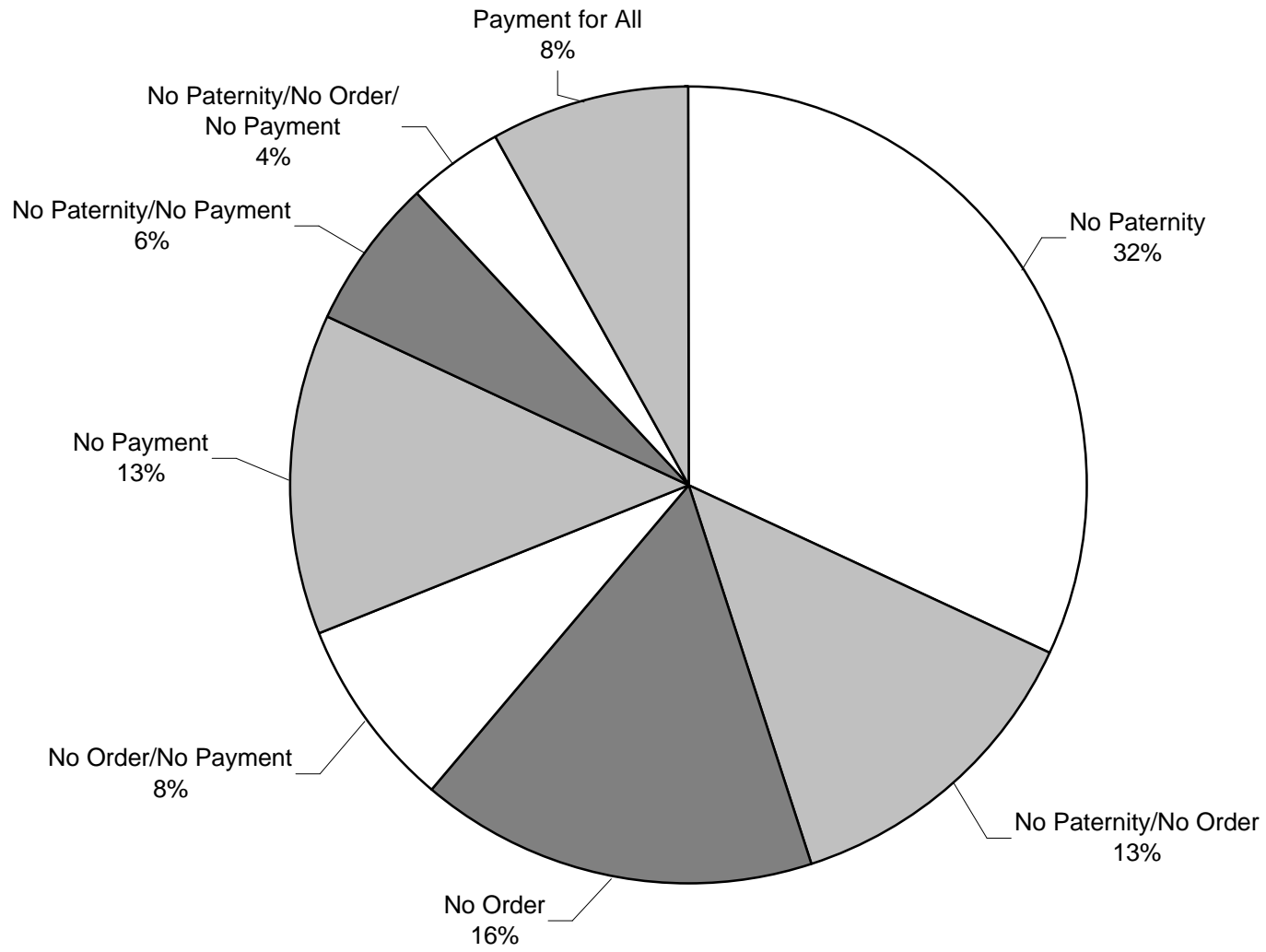
child support. As per our previous discussion, the figure illustrates that only 8 percent of mothers receive support on behalf of all of their children; the remaining 92 percent "fall out" of the system at one or more stages. Almost one-third of mothers (32 percent) lose support solely because there is no legal father, 16 percent solely because there is no order, and 13 percent solely because there is no payment. The remaining mothers—nearly one-third of the sample—fall out at multiple stages of the process. In light of the complexities in classifying mothers with regard to child support outcomes, we return to a child-level analysis for the remainder of the chapter.

Which Children Have Paternity Established Prior to W-2 Entry?

Lack of a legal father clearly contributes to the low rate of support received by children in our sample. As we have seen, almost 40 percent of the children fall out at this stage, and more than half of the mothers lack a legal father for one or more of their children. This step is, of course, only relevant for nonmarital children. Among such children, just over half had paternity established at the time they entered W-2 (Table II.3.2). There are a variety of possible reasons that paternity would not be established at this point. In cases in which the mother was not previously receiving public assistance, failure to establish paternity could merely reflect the parents' preferences. In other cases, the mother could be unwilling or unable to identify the father, the father could have been identified but not located, or the father could still be in the process of establishing paternity.[7]

What factors make a child more likely to have had paternity established at this stage? We begin by briefly discussing variables we expect to be linked to differential rates of paternity establishment, and provide information on this relationship in both a descriptive and multivariate context (Table II.3.2). Our choice of variables is guided by the conceptual framework we have previously delineated. Some of the variables we include are clearly linked to one of the dimensions in our framework, whereas others could be linked to more than one.

We consider the following variables:

Prior AFDC Experience. With extremely limited exceptions, mothers receiving assistance from W-2 and, in the past, from AFDC are obligated to cooperate with the child support system to identify a father and seek a support order. Mothers who are not receiving public assistance, however, are not legally required to do so. We would expect, then, that children whose mothers have had greater exposure to public assistance would be more likely to have had paternity established, because of the decision-making authority of the state in these cases. But the effect of past welfare receipt on parents' preferences for paternity establishment would be in the opposite direction. Welfare recipients would have had less to gain than nonrecipients from paternity establishment, at least in economic terms, under the limited pass-through policy in effect prior to W-2. We classify children according to the number of months in which their mother received AFDC in the two years prior to W-2 entry. At the bivariate level, AFDC history is strongly related to paternity establishment. Just over one-quarter of the children whose mothers have no prior AFDC history have paternity established when they enter W-2, as compared to 49–57 percent of the children whose mothers have received AFDC over the past two years. These differences are confirmed by our multivariate analysis, which controls for a variety of differences among children. It appears that the impact of the state mandate for child support cooperation among welfare recipients outweighs the economic disincentive facing those recipients in the pre-W-2 era.

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[7]When paternity is established through hospital-based acknowledgment, this is not always immediately reflected in the data.

		Probit Model		
	With Paternity Established	Coefficient	S.E.	P-value
Total	52.5%			
Prior AFDC Experience				
None	26.6			
1–18 months	48.9	0.554	0.036	**<0.0001**
19+ months	57.4	0.747	0.037	**<0.0001**
Age at W-2 Entry				
<1	13.5			
1–2	47.0	0.964	0.033	**<0.0001**
3–5	62.0	1.363	0.032	**<0.0001**
6–11	62.7	1.392	0.032	**<0.0001**
12+	51.6	1.093	0.036	**<0.0001**
Mother's Age at Child's Birth				
16–17	57.7			
18–19	57.3	0.072	0.024	**0.003**
20–24	51.4	-0.070	0.022	**0.002**
25–29	48.8	-0.160	0.027	**<0.0001**
30+	42.9	-0.302	0.031	**<0.0001**
County				
Milwaukee	53.0			
Other urban	47.9	0.025	0.025	0.325
Rural	58.9	0.295	0.045	**<0.0001**
Mother's Education				
< High school	51.6			
High school	53.9	0.052	0.017	**0.002**
Post high school	54.3	0.104	0.030	**0.001**
Initial W-2 Tier				
Lower	52.5			
Upper	57.6	0.091	0.017	**<0.001**
Caretaker of Newborn	32.3	-0.176	0.035	**<0.0001**
Mother Cohabiting at W-2 Entry				
Yes	55.0	0.086	0.027	**0.002**
No	47.4			

With Paternity Established	Probit Model		
	Coefficient	S.E.	P-value
Number of Children in Mother's Household			
1	46.8		
2	53.1	-0.096	0.027	**0.0003**
3+	53.9	-0.188	0.025	**<0.0001**
Mother Is U.S. Citizen			
Yes	53.0	0.595	0.096	**<0.0001**
No	26.5		
Mother's Race			
White	55.4		
African American	53.3	-0.203	0.025	**<0.0001**
Hispanic	41.9	-0.470	0.036	**<0.0001**
Native American	62.9	0.008	0.062	0.897
Asian	29.5	-0.278	0.106	**0.009**
Intercept		-1.966	0.11	**<0.0001**
Model Statistics			
N		30,264	
Log Likelihood		-18,743.205	

Note: Probability values of 0.05 or less are shown in bold type.

Child's Age. Paternity establishment rates could differ for children of different ages for several distinct reasons. First, the paternity establishment process can sometimes be lengthy, especially if contested, and this would contribute to a lower rate of paternity establishment among the youngest children. Second, the benefit to mothers may increase as children get older. Unmarried mothers are frequently involved with their child(ren)'s father when the child is born (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1999), and may therefore perceive less value in participating in the formal child support system. Related to this, mothers are more likely to receive informal support on behalf of young children (see Volume II, Chapter 8), and would thus have less need for formal support. Again, this would contribute to a lower rate of paternity establishment among the youngest children. On the other hand, "cohort" effects are also relevant here. The younger children were born during a time of greater policy emphasis on paternity establishment, and this could lead to improved outcomes relative to children born earlier. In sum, there are competing influences on paternity establishment which would be linked to the age of the child. The potential gains to mothers favor somewhat older children and the practices of the state favor somewhat younger children. Our bivariate results show a very low rate of paternity establishment for children under age 1 (14 percent), with dramatically higher rates for older children, reaching a high of 62–63 percent among children aged 3–11, and declining slightly for the oldest children. This pattern is consistent with the competing influences discussed here, and is likewise evident in the multivariate results.

Mother's Age at Child's Birth. Until recently, establishing paternity for nonmarital children was the exception rather than the norm. However, the extensive efforts to promote paternity establishment, including the emphasis in recent years on in-hospital establishment, may contribute to changing norms. We expect changing norms to have the largest impact on mothers who are younger when their child is born, and who thus have had less exposure to a model of unmarried parenting which does not include paternity establishment. As Table II.3.2 shows, the paternity establishment rate does appear to decline among mothers who are older at time of birth—from 57–58 percent to teen mothers, to 43 percent for the oldest mothers. As with the other variables discussed thus far, the difference persists even in a model which controls for a range of other factors. Mothers' age has not been linked to differential paternity establishment in earlier periods (Seltzer, 1999), suggesting that this may be a recent pattern. This is consistent with our hypothesis that younger mothers would be more responsive than older mothers to changing paternity establishment norms.

County. Paternity establishment efforts are conducted at the county level, and outcomes may vary according to county characteristics. We include dummy variables to differentiate among Milwaukee County, other urban counties, and rural counties. Without controlling for differences in child characteristics, descriptive results indicate the highest rate of paternity establishment is in rural counties (59 percent), whereas the lowest rate is in urban areas other than Milwaukee (48 percent). The higher likelihood of paternity establishment in rural counties is evident in the multivariate results as well. It may be that the process of paternity establishment is easier in rural counties with smaller caseloads.

Mother's Education and W-2 Tier. The advantages of paternity establishment are greater when fathers have the financial ability to pay more support, and the potential risk to the father is lower. Thus, we expect both fathers and mothers to cooperate more with the child support system when the father has greater earnings capacity. Because we have no information about fathers in the absence of paternity establishment, we use mother's education and mother's initial W-2 tier as proxies for the father's ability to pay support. Although these are imperfect proxies, patterns of assortative mating suggest that mothers with greater earnings capacity, as evidenced by higher education as well as placement in a higher W-2

tier, would tend to have ex-partners with greater earnings capacity as well.[8] The differences are not sizable at the bivariate level; however, our multivariate results indicate that children with mothers in an upper tier or with higher education do have a higher likelihood of paternity establishment. We also find very low rates for children whose mothers are in the Caretaker of Newborn tier; we expect that this reflects the very young age of these children.

Mother's Cohabitation Status. The expected relationship between the mother's cohabitation status and paternity establishment is ambiguous. Mothers who live with a partner might, in some cases, be living with the father of their child(ren). This would reduce the potential gains from paternity establishment, but would also make such establishment easier. When mothers are living with a new partner, this could be linked to lower rates of paternity establishment, if there are weaker ties between the father and the custodial family. We include a variable denoting mothers who live with a partner at the time of W-2 entry, based on administrative records of household composition. Because we are not confident that the data accurately differentiate between mothers who live with the father of the child(ren) rather than another partner, we do not attempt to distinguish between these circumstances. Both our descriptive and multivariate results show a higher rate of paternity establishment among children whose mothers are cohabiting than among those whose mothers are not.

Multiple Children in Mother's Household. We expect that fathers may have weaker ties to the custodial family when the mother also has children with a different father. We cannot control for this directly, because we have no information about fathers when paternity is not established. However, we include variables indicating that the child's mother has additional children. At the bivariate level, the rate of paternity establishment is slightly higher for children whose mother has one or more additional children. However, our multivariate analysis suggests the opposite, that is, that the likelihood of paternity establishment declines when there are more children in the mother's household.

Citizenship. Paternity establishment poses unique issues for noncitizens, whose preferences may be influenced by implications of paternity establishment or lack thereof. For instance, a noncitizen seeking citizenship must be able to support himself at 125 percent of poverty, which may not be possible for low-income fathers after payment of support obligations, and this may make such fathers reluctant to participate in the formal support system (National Women's Law Center and Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy, 2000). From a policy standpoint, there also may be greater difficulties in locating noncitizens. We include a variable indicating mother's citizenship, based on the administrative data. We expect this to also proxy for father's citizenship status, but cannot differentiate the two. Mothers who are citizens are twice as likely as noncitizens to have paternity established at baseline (53 percent versus 27 percent), a finding which is also highly statistically significant in our model.

Race/Ethnicity. Finally, we include a series of dummy variables to control for race and ethnicity. It is possible that norms and preferences for participating in the formal support system differ among racial and ethnic groups, perhaps because of differing levels of trust in that system or different patterns of informal support. Our descriptive results show similar rates of paternity establishment for whites and African Americans (55 percent and 53 percent), and a lower rate for Hispanics (42 percent) and Asians (30 percent). Once we control for other factors, African Americans also appear to have lower likelihood of paternity establishment.

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[8]This is consistent with the findings of Sorensen and Zibman (2000), who document similar educational levels among poor mothers who do not receive support and poor fathers who do not pay support.

Which Children Obtain Support Orders Prior to W-2 Entry?

Among those children who have a legal father at the time of W-2 entry, more than one-third "fall out" of the system because they lack a support order. Which children are most likely to be covered by a support order? In general, we expect the factors associated with having a support order to be similar to the factors associated with having a legally identified father.

We estimate models similar to those used in our paternity analysis, with three general exceptions: First, we include better measures of fathers' ability to pay support; such variables are not available for our paternity model, because they are known only when the father is identified. Second, because our order analysis includes marital and nonmarital children, we differentiate between these two, and allow some of the independent variables to differentially affect the likelihood of an order for marital versus nonmarital children. Third, we add a county-level variable to control for differing rates of paternity establishment. We add the following specific variables to those used in our prior model:

Father's Employment and Earnings History. We include dummy variables denoting fathers' earnings in the two years before the mother's entry into W-2, and likewise, variables denoting employment stability during that period (measured by number of quarters of employment). These data are based on administrative records of earnings as reported for purposes of Unemployment Insurance. We expect fathers with greater earnings capacity, as evidenced by these variables, to have a higher likelihood of a support order, both because of the increase in potential gain to the mother and the decreasing economic risk to the father. These measures are limited, in that they do not pick up self-employment, informal employment and earnings, or out-of-state employment and earnings.

Parents' Legal Relationship. We expect that the legal status of the parents' relationship would affect the likelihood of having a support order. We identify four categories: nonmarital children, marital children with divorced parents, marital children with separated parents, and marital children for whom the parents' legal status is unknown.[9] We also expect that certain variables in our model may influence the likelihood of an order differently for marital and nonmarital children. We include interaction terms to allow differential effects of mother's age at birth and of cohabitation status. We expect mother's birth age to be more relevant for nonmarital than marital children; for the latter, the time of separation rather than the time of child's birth denotes the first opportunity to participate in the support system. (Unfortunately, the date of separation is not available.) We expect cohabitation status to be more relevant for nonmarital than marital children because it seems less likely that the cohabiting partner would be the marital child's father.

Paternity Establishment Rate in County. The rate of paternity establishment varies among counties. Counties which are more successful at bringing fathers into the system may face added challenges at subsequent stages, because the caseload potentially has less ability and/or inclination to pay support. To partially control for unmeasured differences in case characteristics, we include a variable for the percentage of all IV-D cases in the county in which paternity has been established (and the percentage squared). We expect that higher aggregate rates of paternity establishment would be associated with lower success at the subsequent stage of issuing support orders.[10] Of course, the opposite

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[9]The distinction between divorced and separated parents is based on information in the CARES system regarding the reason for a parent's absence from the home, based on the W-2 recipient's report to the case worker.

[10]This variable is defined over the entire county IV-D caseload, not just the subset of those cases that are in our sample.

relationship is also possible: it may be that the counties which are most effective at bringing fathers into the system continue to be more effective at the subsequent stages.

We again provide both descriptive and multivariate analyses, differentiating between children who are and are not covered by a support order at the time of W-2 entry (Table II.3.3). The sample includes marital and nonmarital children with a legal father at W-2 entry. Thus, the model seeks to explain factors associated with having a support order, assuming the intermediate hurdle of establishing a legal father has been successfully crossed. This differs from most prior work on child support orders, which has not limited the analysis to children with legal fathers because it has lacked information on paternity establishment.

Overall, results are quite consistent with those for paternity establishment. Children whose mothers have had a longer welfare history are more likely to be covered by a support order. Only 42 percent of children whose mothers are new to the welfare system have a support order, as compared to more than two-thirds of children whose mothers have the greatest welfare experience.

We find a surprising relationship between parents' legal relationship and the probability of a support order. As expected, children whose parents are separated are less likely to have an order than similar children with divorced parents. On the other hand, and counter to expectation, nonmarital children are significantly more likely to be covered by an order than are children with divorced parents. At the bivariate level, the differences are striking. Children of divorced parents are twice as likely to be covered by an order as are children of separated parents (37 percent versus 18 percent), but only half as likely as are nonmarital children who have a legal father identified (37 percent versus 74 percent). The latter finding is surprising, given that child support research typically finds that orders are at least as common in divorce as in nonmarital cases.[11] We expect that our findings are unique to the welfare population. It may be that for divorced mothers, lack of a support order (and thus of formal support) is a risk factor for seeking public assistance.

The likelihood of having a support order is substantially higher for all children over age 1, though somewhat less so for the oldest children. This pattern holds for both marital and nonmarital children, as indicated by the lack of significance of the interaction terms.

In contrast, the relationship between the mother's age when the child was born and the likelihood of a support order differs for marital and nonmarital children. In the case of marital children—reflected in the uninteracted coefficients—the likelihood of an order increases when the mother is older. The opposite is true for nonmarital children, for whom the likelihood of an order declines for older mothers. This is evident by looking at the negative coefficients for the interaction terms in combination with the uninteracted mother's age coefficients. The declining probability of an order for older mothers is consistent with our earlier findings for paternity establishment.

Children outside of Milwaukee, whether in rural or urban counties, fare worse in terms of obtaining support orders—a finding contrary to our paternity findings. Interestingly, our results also suggest that children in counties with higher aggregate rates of paternity establishment are less likely to be covered by a support order, perhaps because the caseload that is eligible for support is more disadvantaged.

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[11]Most research in fact indicates that orders are much more common among divorce than nonmarital cases, but such research does not limit the nonmarital sample to children with paternity established. As noted earlier, past research in Wisconsin found similar order rates for divorce and nonmarital children, among the subset of children with legal fathers (Meyer and Bartfeld, 1993).

Table II.3.3
Child Support Orders at W-2 Entry among Children with Legal Fathers:
Descriptive and Multivariate Analyses

	With Order	Probit Model		
		Coefficient	S.E.	P-value
Total	63.4%			
Prior AFDC Experience				
None	42.1			
1–18 months	58.3	0.264	0.045	**<0.0001**
19+ months	68.0	0.439	0.047	**<0.0001**
Parents' Relationship				
Separated	18.1	-0.576	0.058	**<0.0001**
Divorced	37.1			
Don't know if separated or divorced	29.6	-0.198	0.052	**0.0001**
Nonmarital	74.3	1.064	0.156	**<0.0001**
Child's Age at W-2 Entry				
<1	45.7			
1–2	68.6	0.403	0.121	**0.001**
3–5	71.9	0.450	0.114	**<0.0001**
6–11	62.2	0.395	0.110	**0.0003**
12+	50.3	0.219	0.116	0.059
Child's Age at W-2 Entry * Nonmarital				
<1				
1–2		0.070	0.137	0.611
3–5		0.191	0.130	0.142
6–11		0.025	0.126	0.842
12+		-0.083	0.133	0.534
Mother's Age at Child's Birth				
16–17	72.2			
18–19	68.4	0.081	0.094	0.391
20–24	62.4	0.093	0.085	0.276
25–29	56.5	0.186	0.089	**0.037**
30+	53.3	0.275	0.095	**0.004**
Mother's Age at Child's Birth * Nonmarital				
16–17				
18–19		-0.129	0.100	0.198
20–24		-0.181	0.091	**0.046**
25–29		-0.396	0.096	**<0.0001**
30+		-0.596	0.105	**<0.0001**

Table II.3.3, continued

	With Order	Probit Model		
		Coefficient	S.E.	P-value
County				
Milwaukee	68.2			
Other urban	51.8	-0.124	0.040	**0.002**
Rural	45.2	-0.124	0.061	**0.043**
Percentage of IV-D Cases with Paternity		-0.073	0.032	**0.021**
Percentage of IV-D Cases w/Paternity (Squared)		0.0005	0.0002	**0.013**
Father's Earnings in 2 Years before W-2 Entry				
$0	57.3			
$1,000–$5,000	67.3			
$5,000–$15,000	67.4	0.158	0.035	**<0.0001**
$15,000–$25,000	64.2	0.165	0.050	**0.001**
$25,000+	66.4	0.197	0.068	**0.004**
Father's Quarters Employed in 2 Years before W-2 Entry				
0	57.3	-0.177	0.027	**<0.0001**
1–4	66.1			
5–7	67.0	0.071	0.032	**0.027**
8	67.7	0.112	0.042	**0.008**
Mother's Education				
< High school	64.5			
High school	62.9	0.029	0.022	0.177
Post high school	59.4	0.058	0.036	0.102
Initial W-2 Tier				
Lower	64.1			
Upper	62.8	0.017	0.049	0.278
Caretaker of Newborn	59.0	0.053	0.021	0.421
Number of Children in Mother's Household				
1	75.8			
2	69.9	-0.165	0.037	**<0.0001**
3	59.1	-0.444	0.035	**<0.0001**
Mother Cohabiting at W-2 Entry				
Yes	42.2	-0.264	0.050	**<0.0001**
No	66.9			
Mother Cohabiting * Nonmarital		-0.126	0.060	**0.036**

Table II.3.3, continued

	With Order	Probit Model		
		Coefficient	S.E.	P-value
Mother Is U.S. Citizen				
Yes	64.4	0.452	0.126	**0.0003**
No	18.3			
Mother's Race				
White	53.8			
African American	70.3	0.045	0.031	0.144
Hispanic	51.2	-0.148	0.044	**0.001**
Native American	49.8	-0.162	0.068	0.172
Asian	20.0	-0.346	0.134	**0.010**
Intercept		1.369	1.233	0.267
Model Statistics				
N		20,663		
Log Likelihood		-11,052.494		

Note: Probability values of 0.05 or less are shown in bold type.

Both the amount of the father's earnings prior to the mother's W-2 entry and the number of quarters in which he was employed are significant predictors of a support order, confirming that ability to pay is an important factor. At the bivariate level, however, we find much less of a pattern than expected: 57 percent of children whose father has no reported earnings are covered by an order, as compared to roughly 67 percent of fathers with positive employment and earnings. There are no net differences in support outcomes between children of better- than less-educated mothers, or between children whose mothers are assigned to upper rather than lower tiers, perhaps because we now have better measures of fathers' earnings capacity.[12]

Household and family composition also appears important. The more children the mother has in her household, the less likely a child is to be covered by a support order, perhaps reflecting weaker ties between resident and nonresident families when more than one father is involved. This is consistent with our paternity findings. Unlike paternity establishment, however, the likelihood of an order is much lower when the mother is cohabiting at W-2 entry, particularly for nonmarital children. We expect this reflects the likelihood that that some cohabitations are with the child's father, and support may be deemed less necessary in those cases. There is no explicit policy regarding how cohabitation should affect support orders, and past research has found considerable variation across counties (Meyer et al., 1997). Cohabitation with a new partner could also affect the likelihood of support. Mothers may be less inclined to seek support when involved with a new partner, and fathers may be less inclined to provide support under those circumstances.

Citizenship is an important predictor of having an order, net of other variables. We also find some racial differences in our multivariate results: Hispanics and Asians less likely than whites to have a support order, we find no difference between African Americans and whites, a finding that differs from the case of paternity establishment.

How Much Support Is Owed to Children?

Our primary focus in this chapter is on the extent to which children of W-2 recipients have legal fathers and support orders, thus enabling them to receive formal support payments. A detailed analysis of the magnitude of support orders is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, this section provides summary information on amounts owed in support, an issue we will address at greater length in future work. A general understanding of the size of support orders provides some insight regarding the support which is potentially lost when orders are not in effect.

In Wisconsin, child support orders are generally one of three types: fixed-sum, percentage-expressed, or "hybrid." Fixed-sum orders are the most common, comprising three-quarters of the orders in our sample. Percentage-expressed orders are explicitly linked to income. The order is entered as a percentage of current income rather than a fixed-dollar amount; such orders comprise 20 percent of our sample. Hybrid orders are essentially a cross between the two, whereby the obligor is required to pay the larger of a fixed-sum or percentage amount. Such an order thus provides an effective floor to a support order while allowing it to automatically rise as income increases. Five percent of the orders in our sample are of this type.

Table II.3.4 provides summary information about the magnitude of support orders covering children in our sample, differentiating among orders which cover one, two, and three children. This table

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[12]If we estimate this same model using only the variables from the paternity model, the coefficient for the best educated mothers is positive and significant, suggesting that this does indeed proxy for father's earnings capacity.

Table II.3.4
Monthly Child Support Obligations at Entry into W-2

	Number of children in order		
	1	2	3
N	9,541	273	206
Mean	$122.50	$206.10	$248.50
Distribution			
<$50	11.1%	3.8%	2.9%
$50–$100	24.8	12.4	9.7
$101–$200	55.7	43.2	22.3
$201–$300	6.5	26.4	36.4
>$300	1.9	14.1	28.6

Sample: 9,156 fixed-sum and hybrid orders covering 10,293 children.

is limited to the fixed-sum and hybrid orders.[13] More than 90 percent of the orders cover only one child. In nonmarital cases, each child is typically covered by a separate order even if a mother has multiple children with the same father. More than 90 percent of these orders are for nonmarital children. The mean monthly order for 1 child is $122, increasing to $206 for two children and $249 for three children. Focusing on the one-child orders, we find that roughly one-tenth are nominal orders of less than $50 per month; one-quarter range from $50–$100; more than half (56 percent) are $100–$200; and the remaining 8 percent are almost entirely in the $200–$300 range. The distributions are somewhat higher for orders covering more children. In the case of two children, 40 percent of orders are $200 per month or higher, as are almost two-thirds of the orders which cover three children.

What Progress Do Children Make over the Two Years following W-2 Entry?

Thus far, we have focused on children's child support outcomes as of the time they enter the W-2 program. Although more than 60 percent of children fall out of the system at either the paternity establishment or order establishment stage, we would expect to see improvements in these outcomes over time. Not only are mothers required to cooperate with the child support system, they also have a strong incentive to do so–both to supplement welfare income and to establish a source of supplemental income for the longer term.

Figure II.3.3 illustrates the extent to which children progress through the child support system over the two years following W-2 entry. We look at sequential 3-month periods, each time classifying children in one of four categories: no legal father; legal father but no order in effect since W-2 entry; legal father with order since W-2 entry, but no current order; and legal father with current support order. Only children in the fourth category are eligible to receive formal child support payments. Nonmarital children could be at any stage in the process, while marital children are limited to the final three stages.

The figure reveals a story of modest gains over the two-year period. The share of children with no legal father declined steadily, from 39 percent in the quarter of entry to 29 percent two years later. The share of children with a legal father but no support orders remained stable at 21–22 percent. In addition, 5 percent of children lost a support order to the custodial mother by the end of the two-year period. Finally, the share with a current order increased from 39 percent to 46 percent. In sum, children did improve their position in the child support system over this period, but the gains are not dramatic. By the eighth quarter after entry, fully half of the children had still not progressed to the point of having a support order.[14]

To better illustrate changes in child support status over time, Table II.3.5 summarizes transitions in children's position in the child support system between the quarter of entry and the eighth quarter following W-2 entry. The large majority of children who had not progressed fully through the interim stages as of W-2 entry remained "stuck" at their initial position. Almost three-quarters of children without a legal father at W-2 entry still had no legal father two years later, and more than 80 percent of

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[13]In the case of hybrid orders, we report the fixed component of the order.

[14]We note an important caveat in interpreting our results for the post-baseline period. We cannot tell, from the available data, whether the mother continues to be eligible for child support over the two-year period. Should the child's living arrangements change—living with the previously noncustodial parent, or living with another relative, or going into foster care—this would not be reflected in our data. As a result, some of the children who appear to "fall out" of the child support system may in reality no longer be eligible for support in conjunction with the initial custodial parent. We do not expect this to be a large problem, but we expect that this factor contributes to the 5 percent lost-order rate documented above.

Figure II.3.3
Children's Status in Child Support System, through Eighth Quarter

Legend: ■ No Legal Father   ▨ No Order   ☐ Past Order   ■ Order
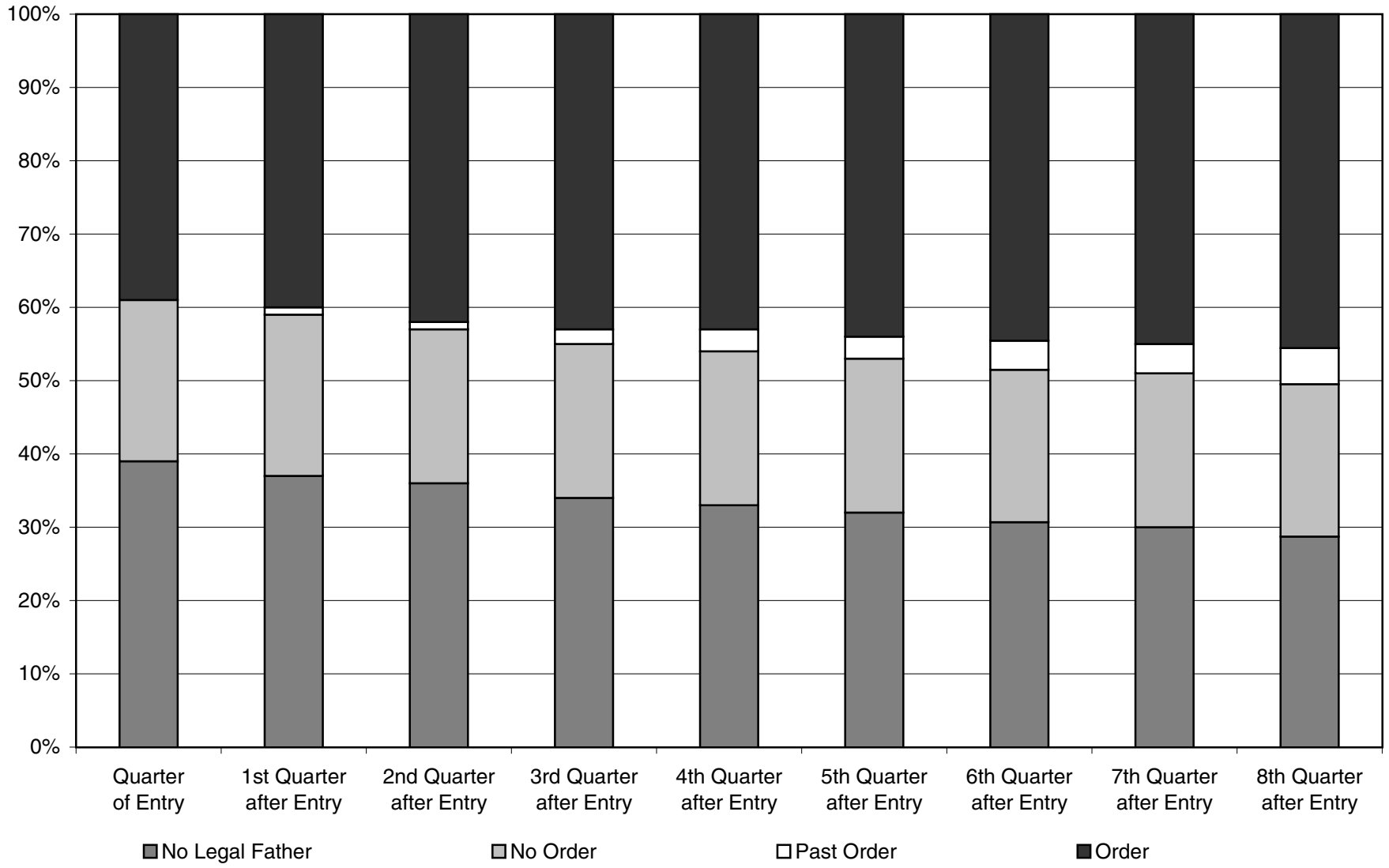
Table II.3.5
Changes in Child Support Status from Quarter of W-2 Entry to Eighth Quarter

Status at End of Quarter of Entry	Status at End of 8th Quarter after Entry			
	No Legal Father	No Order	Previous Order	Current Order
No Legal Father	72.7%	7.8%	1.4%	18.2%
No Order		81.0	6.5	12.5
Current Order			7.0	93.0

Sample: 35,060 children.

children who entered the program with a legal father but no support obligation remained at that same point for the duration. In contrast, more than 70 percent of the children who were successful in having a legal father established during this period were also covered by a support order by the two-year point.

Paternity Establishment and Support Orders Two Years after W-2 Entry

Our previous analyses suggest that the children whose parents were most likely to have successfully navigated the child support system at the time of W-2 entry included children who were older, whose mothers had prior AFDC experience, and whose fathers had a greater earnings capacity. Additionally, we found better outcomes among whites than other racial groups, and better support outcomes among nonmarital than marital children. Nonmarital children born to younger mothers were more likely to have paternity established and support orders than children born to older mothers. In the case of marital children, the opposite is true: children born to younger mothers had a lower likelihood of having an order.

To what extent do these same attributes still predict favorable outcomes two years after program entry? We examine this question using models analogous to those used in the baseline period. That is, we examine the correlates of paternity establishment among all nonmarital children and of support orders among marital and nonmarital children with a legal father two years after entry, using the same variables as in our baseline models. The parameters describe the relationship between the independent variables and the paternity and order outcomes after incorporating differential outcomes before and after W-2 entry. All of the children's mothers would at this point have been subject to child support cooperation requirements, as they were not at the point they entered W-2.

Paternity Establishment. We focus first on the bivariate and multivariate relationships between the independent variables and the paternity outcome (both in Table II.3.6). The rate of paternity establishment was higher for all subgroups than it was at W-2 entry (column 1). The multivariate analysis shows, primarily, that the factors which were linked to paternity establishment at W-2 entry continued to be so two years later. In virtually all cases, the direction and statistical significance of the coefficients are comparable for the baseline and two-year models.[15] Nonetheless, we find evidence of several notable changes. Focusing on the descriptive results for ease of interpretation, we highlight three interesting changes between the baseline and two-year patterns.

First, the large baseline differences in the rate of paternity establishment for children whose mothers were new to the welfare system, relative to those with prior AFDC experience, were much less pronounced two years later. For those new to the welfare system, the rate of paternity establishment more than doubled, from 27 percent at W-2 entry (see Table II.3.2) to 59 percent at the two-year point. The paternity rates for those with recent AFDC experience were only moderately higher than this—65–68 percent. The difference probably reflects enforcement of the child support cooperation requirement, which we would expect to differentially benefit those new to the system and thus newly subject to that requirement. The full pass-through policy under W-2 may also have played a role. In comparison to parents with prior welfare experience, those who were new to the welfare system may have had a more accurate understanding of the new pass-through policy, and may thus have had a greater preference for paternity establishment. Indeed, the evaluation of the pass-through found that the only significant impact of the new policy on paternity establishment occurred among children of mothers without prior AFDC experience.

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[15]A direct comparison of the magnitude of coefficients between the two models is not meaningful.

Table II.3.6
Paternity Establishment for Nonmarital Children by Two Years after W-2 Entry:
Descriptive and Multivariate Analyses

| | With Paternity Established | Probit Model | | |
		Coefficient	S.E.	P-value
Total	66.8%			
Prior AFDC Experience				
None	59.2			
1–18 months	65.3	0.236	0.033	**<0.0001**
19+ months	68.5	0.417	0.034	**<0.0001**
Child's Age at W-2 Entry				
<1	58.1			
1–2	65.7	0.203	0.029	**<0.0001**
3–5	72.3	0.410	0.028	**<0.0001**
6–11	69.6	0.350	0.028	**<0.0001**
12+	58.5	0.041	0.032	0.205
Mother's Age at Child's Birth				
16–17	68.3			
18–19	71.8	0.085	0.025	**0.001**
20–24	67.1	-0.038	0.023	0.088
25–29	62.8	-0.165	0.027	**<0.0001**
30+	58.8	-0.283	0.031	**<0.0001**
County				
Milwaukee	65.7			
Other urban	69.1	0.079	0.025	**0.002**
Rural	80.7	0.369	0.047	**<0.0001**
Mother's Education				
< High school	65.3			
High school	69.2	0.061	0.017	**0.0003**
Post high school	68.5	0.087	0.031	**0.004**
Initial W-2 Tier				
Lower	65.1			
Upper	70.7	0.109	0.017	**<0.0001**
Caretaker of Newborn	67.1	0.091	0.033	**<0.0001**
Mother Cohabiting at W-2 entry				
Yes	70.6	0.068	0.028	**0.014**
No	66.5			

With Paternity Established	Probit Model		
	Coefficient	S.E.	P-value

Number of Children in Mother's Household

1	69.6			
2	68.2	-0.113	0.027	**<0.0001**
3+	65.7	-0.196	0.025	**<0.0001**

Mother Is U.S. Citizen

Yes	67.3	0.686	0.091	**<0.0001**
No	37.4			

Mother's Race

White	75.7			
African American	66.4	-0.218	0.026	**<0.0001**
Hispanic	56.5	-0.461	0.035	**<0.0001**
Native American	76.5	-0.073	0.065	0.258
Asian	44.1	-0.161	0.102	0.114

Intercept		-0.521	0.104	**<0.0001**

Model Statistics

N	30,264	
Log Likelihood	-18,511.949	

Note: Probability values of 0.05 or less are shown in bold type.

A second difference in paternity establishment after two years was a much weaker link between the child's age at entry to W-2 and the paternity establishment rate, primarily reflecting large gains among the youngest children (from 14 percent to 58 percent for children less than 1 at W-2 entry, and from 47 percent to 66 percent for children aged 1–2 at W-2 entry). This is consistent with a progression through the stages of the child support system as children aged. Third, county differences were more pronounced than at baseline. We find particularly high success in rural counties: 81 percent compared to 65–69 percent in Milwaukee and other urban counties.

Overall, our results suggest that the same factors that predict paternity establishment at W-2 entry continued to do so two years later, though there is some change in the relative importance of specific variables.

Support Orders. We next turn to correlates of child support orders after two years. Again, we present both descriptive and multivariate results (Table II.3.7). These analyses are based on the subset of children who had a legal father by the two-year point. This is a different sample from Table II.3.3, which was based on presence of a legal father at W-2 entry.

The bivariate relationship between the variables of interest and the existence of a support order after two years was strikingly similar to the relationship at W-2 entry. With very few exceptions, the likelihood of having an order two years after W-2 entry, given that a legal father is identified, was substantively unchanged from the likelihood at W-2 entry. This does not imply that no orders were gained over this period. There were more children eligible for support orders after two years because paternity had been established for more children, so that a constant percentage implies an absolute increase.[16]

We do find some notable changes between the likelihood of an order at the two-year point and at W-2 entry. As we saw for paternity establishment, orders increased from 42 percent to 56 percent for children whose mothers did not have a prior AFDC history (given a legal father). This is consistent with the fact that such mothers no longer had the discretion not to seek an order. Among the youngest children, the prevalence of orders increased from 46 percent to 70 percent. Again, we expect that this reflects the natural progression through the system as children age. Indeed, the two-year order rate of 70 percent for children who were less than age 1 at baseline was virtually the same as the baseline rate of 69 percent for children aged 1–2.

For marital children, however, our multivariate results indicate that the likelihood of an order in fact declined with the age of the child, a result which was not true at W-2 entry. This was not the case for nonmarital children, as is apparent by looking at the age coefficients in combination with the age-nonmarital interactions. The positive and significant signs on the interaction terms indicate that the lower rate of orders among marital children became particularly pronounced as the children grew older. Other research has found that shared physical custody and father custody are more common in divorce cases as children get older (e.g., Cancian and Meyer, 2000). Even in the absence of formal shared custody or father custody arrangements, it may be that older children spend more time with their noncustodial parent, which could reduce the need for formal support.

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[16]Also, as noted earlier, a small percentage of children appear to lose orders—either because their orders in fact end, or because they change living arrangements and their orders are no longer picked up in our data.

Table II.3.7
Child Support Orders 2 Years after W-2 Entry, among Children with Legal Fathers:
Descriptive and Multivariate Analyses

	With Order	Probit Model		
		Coefficient	S.E.	P-value
Total	64.3%			
Prior AFDC Experience				
None	56.4			
1–18 months	60.1	0.104	0.036	**0.004**
19+ months	67.5	0.283	0.038	**<0.0001**
Parents' Relationship				
Separated	27.4	-0.429	0.055	**<0.0001**
Divorced	39.7			
Don't know if separated or divorced	32.3	-0.242	0.051	**<0.0001**
Nonmarital	71.9	0.649	0.132	**<0.0001**
Child's Age at W-2 Entry				
<1	69.7			
1–2	70.6	-0.060	0.103	0.560
3–5	70.7	-0.190	0.096	**0.049**
6–11	61.1	-0.382	0.093	**<0.0001**
12+	49.6	-0.527	0.099	**<0.0001**
Child's Age at W-2 Entry * Nonmarital				
<1				
1–2		0.095	0.110	0.388
3–5		0.319	0.103	**0.002**
6–11		0.326	0.098	**0.001**
12+		0.182	0.107	0.088
Mother's Age at Child's Birth				
16–17	71.9			
18–19	67.5	-0.001	0.092	0.990
20–24	63.5	0.076	0.082	0.354
25–29	58.6	0.199	0.086	**0.021**
30+	57.2	0.258	0.091	**0.005**
Mother's Age at Child's Birth * Nonmarital				
16–17				
18–19		-0.100	0.097	0.301
20–24		-0.199	0.087	**0.022**
25–29		-0.438	0.092	**<0.0001**
30+		-0.570	0.099	**<0.0001**

	With Order	Probit Model		
		Coefficient	S.E.	P-value
County				
Milwaukee	68.1			
Other urban	54.8	-0.218	0.035	**<0.0001**
Rural	50.2	-0.219	0.054	**<0.0001**
Percentage of IV-D Cases with Paternity		-0.080	0.028	**0.004**
Percentage of IV-D Cases with Paternity (Squared)		0.0006	0.0002	**0.002**
Father's Earnings in 2 Years before W-2 Entry				
$0	59.0			
$1,000–$5,000	68.2			
$5,000–$15,000	67.3	0.091	0.031	**0.004**
$15,000–$25,000	64.1	0.111	0.045	**0.013**
$25,000+	65.3	0.120	0.061	0.051
Father's Quarters Employed in 2 Years before W-2 Entry				
0	59.0	-0.146	0.024	**<0.0001**
1–4	67.1			
5–7	67.8	0.064	0.029	**0.026**
8	67.2	0.071	0.037	0.055
Mother's Education				
< High school	64.7			
High school	64.3	0.040	0.019	**0.039**
Post high school	61.8	0.062	0.032	0.054
Initial W-2 Tier				
Lower	64.7			
Upper	63.7	0.022	0.019	0.245
Caretaker of Newborn	63.5	-0.009	0.038	0.804
Number of Children in Mother's Household				
1	77.6			
2	70.0	-0.209	0.032	**<0.0001**
3	57.3	-0.462	0.030	**<0.0001**
Mother Cohabiting at W-2 Entry				
Yes	45.9	-0.170	0.047	**0.0003**
No	67.2			
Mother Cohabiting * Nonmarital		-0.193	0.055	**0.0005**

	With Order	Probit Model		
		Coefficient	S.E.	P-value
Mother Is U.S. Citizen				
Yes	63.9	0.279	0.106	**0.009**
No	23.7			
Mother's Race				
White	57.2			
African American	70.0	0.095	0.027	**0.001**
Hispanic	52.7	-0.149	0.039	**0.0001**
Native American	51.7	-0.131	0.062	**0.036**
Asian	24.1	-0.423	0.112	**0.0002**
Intercept		2.746	1.073	**0.011**
Model Statistics				
N		24,928		
Log Likelihood		-14,147.513		

Note: Probability values of 0.05 or less are shown in bold type.

Predicted Probabilities of Successfully Navigating the Child Support System

Our prior analyses have examined paternity establishment and support orders sequentially. That is, we examined the factors associated with having a support order only for those children who had achieved the interim step (automatic for marital children) of establishing a legal father. For the most part, we found that similar factors predicted both the paternity establishment and order outcomes.

In our final model, we examine the factors associated with having a support order by two years after W-2 entry, considering the direct effect as well as indirect effects which occur through an impact on the intermediate step of establishing paternity. We include all children in this analysis, those with and without legal fathers and orders at W-2 entry. Thus, the coefficients reflect the net impact of the independent variables, whose influence could occur before or after W-2 entry, and where the influence could occur in part through an impact on the intermediate step of paternity establishment. Because we include all children, including those without a legal father, the variables are limited to those in the paternity models.

Results are shown in Table II.3.8, and are quite consistent with our findings from the interim models. A notable difference is that, unlike our sequential order model, there is no longer a significant difference between the likelihood of orders for nonmarital children and children of divorced parents. To make the results more directly interpretable, we use the coefficients from this final model to compute the predicted probability of having a child support order by two years after W-2 entry, for a variety of prototypical children. Our hypothetical cases are selected to illustrate the progressive impact of the variables on the likelihood of achieving a support order. Results are shown in Table II.3.9.

We begin by considering a nonmarital child under age 1, whose mother is assigned to a lower W-2 tier in Milwaukee. We assume that the mother has not completed high school, is Hispanic and is not a U.S. citizen, has no prior AFDC experience, is living with a partner when she enters W-2, has three or more children, and was over age 30 when this child was born. According to our model, the predicted probability that a child with these characteristics would be covered by a support order two years after W-2 entry is extremely low—3 percent (row 1). If we instead assume the mother is a citizen, the predicted probability increases to 9 percent (row 2). Were she not cohabiting at W-2 entry, the probability would increase further, to 12 percent (row 3).

The next two rows illustrate the magnitude of racial and ethnic differences in support outcomes, net of other factors. If we assume the mother is African American instead of Hispanic, the child has a higher predicted probability of having an order (19 percent, row 4), increasing to 22 percent if she is white (row 5).

Children of mothers with longer AFDC experience have substantially better outcomes. In this case, the predicted probability of an order increases to 35 percent if we assume the mother was receiving AFDC during the two years prior to W-2 entry (row 6). The child has a higher likelihood of having an order if the mother is in an upper versus lower tier (38 percent, row 7), perhaps because this proxies for a partner with greater ability to pay. Likewise, the likelihood of an order is higher if the mother is better educated—42 percent in the case of a mother with post-high-school education (row 8).

Outcomes are better in rural counties, net of other factors. If we assume this child lives in a rural area rather than Milwaukee, the predicted probability of having an order increases to 46 percent (row 9). As noted, this predicted advantage could reflect unmeasured differences in case characteristics and/or differences in local child support practices.

Table II.3.8
Child Support Orders Two Years after W-2 Entry, among All Children

	With Order	Probit Model		
		Coefficient	S.E.	P-value
Total	46.3%			
Prior AFDC Experience				
None	39.5			
1–18 Months	43.1	0.188	0.029	**<0.0001**
19+ Months	29.9	0.407	0.030	**<0.0001**
Parents' Relationship				
Separated	27.4	-0.370	0.055	**<0.0001**
Divorced	39.7			
Don't know if separated or divorced	32.3	-0.202	0.051	**<0.0001**
Nonmarital	48.5	-0.169	0.129	0.191
Child's Age at W-2 Entry				
<1	42.9			
1–2	48.7	-0.049	0.103	0.630
3–5	53.7	-0.191	0.096	**0.045**
6–11	45.8	-0.416	0.092	**<0.0001**
12+	33.8	-0.564	0.098	**<0.0001**
Child's Age at W-2 Entry * Nonmarital				
<1				
1–2		0.200	0.106	0.060
3–5		0.532	0.099	**<0.0001**
6–11		0.613	0.095	**<0.0001**
12+		0.399	0.102	**<0.0001**
Mother's Age at Child's Birth				
16–17	50.9			
18–19	50.6	0.008	0.092	0.934
20–24	46.0	0.068	0.082	0.404
25–29	41.4	0.179	0.086	**0.037**
30+	38.8	0.222	0.091	**0.014**
Mother's Age at Child's Birth * Nonmarital				
16–17				
18–19		-0.001	0.095	0.989
20–24		-0.142	0.085	0.095
25–29		-0.395	0.089	**<0.0001**
30+		-0.558	0.095	**<0.0001**

	With Order	Probit Model		
		Coefficient	S.E.	P-value
County				
Milwaukee	47.0			
Other urban	42.9	-0.020	0.022	0.349
Rural	45.2	0.107	0.034	**0.002**
Mother's Education				
< High school	45.0			
High school	48.1	0.063	0.015	**<0.0001**
Post high school	47.1	0.090	0.026	**0.001**
Initial W-2 Tier				
Lower	45.2			
Upper	48.4	0.082	0.016	**<0.0001**
Caretaker of Newborn	46.1	0.068	0.030	**0.023**
Number of Children in Mother's Household				
1	56.3			
2	50.9	-0.191	0.024	**<0.0001**
3+	42.4	-0.396	0.023	**<0.0001**
Mother Cohabiting at W-2 Entry				
Yes	37.1	-0.220	0.047	**<0.0001**
No	47.5			
Mother Cohabiting * Nonmarital		0.057	0.053	0.276
Mother Is U.S. Citizen				
Yes	47.0	0.524	0.084	**<0.0001**
No	14.9			
Mother's Race				
White	48.2			
African American	48.3	-0.102	0.022	**<0.0001**
Hispanic	34.3	-0.383	0.031	**<0.0001**
Native American	42.7	-0.164	0.051	**0.001**
Asian	16.3	-0.398	0.092	**<0.0001**
Intercept		-0.409	0.155	**0.008**
Model Statistics				
N		34,970		
Log Likelihood		-22,907.640		

Note: Probability values of 0.05 or less are shown in bold type.

Table II.3.9
Predicted Probability of Support Order during Eighth Quarter after W-2 Entry, for Prototypical Nonmarital Children
Regardless of Status at W-2 Entry

Row	Citizen	Cohabiting	Race/ Ethnicity	AFDC Exp.	W-2 Tier	Mother's Education	Location	Child's Age	Mother's Birth Age	No. of Children	Predicted Probability
1	No	Yes	Hispanic	None	Lower	< High School	Milwaukee	<1	>30	3	**0.03**
2	Yes										**0.09**
3		No									**0.12**
4			Afr. Am.								**0.19**
5			White								**0.22**
6				19–24 mo.							**0.35**
7					Upper						**0.38**
8						> High School					**0.42**
9							Rural				**0.46**
10								6–11			**0.54**
11									18–19		**0.67**
12										1	**0.8**

Note: Predictions are based on a probit analysis of support orders during the eighth quarter after W-2 entry (Table II.3.8), among all children regardless of paternity or order status at entry.

Both the child's age at W-2 entry and the mother's age at birth are important. If the child was 6–11 years old rather than an infant when the mother entered W-2, the likelihood of having an order would increase to 54 percent (row 10). Likewise, the predicted probability increases if we assume the mother was aged 18–19 when the child was born (67 percent, row 11). If there was only one child instead of three, the probability would increase to 80 percent (row 12). The relatively large impact could reflect differences in fathers' willingness to pay child support when the mother has multiple children, and/or unmeasured differences between mothers with varying numbers of children.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter documents the stages at which potential child support is lost to welfare recipients in Wisconsin. It provides an integrated look at welfare clients' success—or lack thereof—in establishing paternity, obtaining support orders, and receiving support payments. Our primary focus is on the intermediate steps of paternity establishment and support orders, because success at these stages is necessary to be eligible for formal support. We illustrate the factors associated with successful navigation of the child support system, both before and after W-2 entry.

Our descriptive analyses suggest that few women and children on welfare benefit fully from the potential child support available to them, either at the time they enter W-2 or over the subsequent two years. The barriers occur at each stage of the child support process. Just over half of children have legal fathers when they enter W-2; fewer than 40 percent are covered by a support order; and only 14 percent actually have support paid on their behalf during their first three months on the program. Although we document nontrivial gains over the subsequent two years, overall success rates remain low. Roughly three-quarters of children who had not achieved one of the intermediate steps of paternity establishment or order establishment when they entered W-2 had still not achieved this two years later. Children whose mothers are new to the welfare system make much more sizable gains over this period, more than doubling their rates of paternity establishment. Even after two years, however, they continue to lag behind children of mothers with prior welfare experience.

Our analyses differ from much of the prior work on child support outcomes in that we focus on children rather than mothers as our unit of analysis. We illustrate the importance of this distinction by documenting the strikingly different conclusions which result from the two approaches. We find that even when mothers successfully navigate the child support system on behalf of one child, they are often not able to do so on behalf of all of them. Whereas 73 percent of mothers have at least one child with a legal father when they enter W-2, fewer than half have a legal father for each of their children; there are similar discrepancies when we examine orders and payments. Statistics which ignore differences in support outcomes within families may paint an overoptimistic picture of the effectiveness of the child support system.

Comparison of our findings to available statistics for the IV-D caseload is informative. We find that two-thirds of nonmarital children have had paternity established by two years after W-2 entry. This is somewhat lower than the 76–80 percent of nonmarital children on the IV-D caseload in Wisconsin who had paternity established between 1994 and 1997 (U.S. Office of Child Support Enforcement, 1999), suggesting that current welfare recipients may be an even more challenging population than the somewhat broader IV-D caseload as a whole. Focusing on support orders, we find that the share of mothers owed support at the time of W-2 entry (57 percent, including those who do and do not have legal fathers for their children) is slightly higher than the national average among all child-support-eligible mothers as reported by the Census Bureau (53 percent), higher than the national average among welfare recipients (48 percent), and considerably higher than the national average among never-married mothers

(40 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). These data suggest that Wisconsin is doing better than average in securing support orders for welfare recipients.

Much of our focus is on identifying factors linked to differential rates of paternity establishment and support orders. We use a conceptual framework which links participation in the formal support system to differences in fathers' preferences, mothers' preferences, and the preferences and practices of the state. We find, for the most part, that similar factors predict success at both of the interim steps. Children whose parents are most likely to have successfully navigated the child support system include children who are somewhat older, whose mothers have had longer exposure to the welfare system, and whose fathers have greater earnings capacity. We find better outcomes among whites than among other racial and ethnic groups, and dramatically higher success among U.S. citizens than among noncitizens. Our results suggest that nonmarital children with younger mothers have better outcomes than similar children with older mothers, perhaps because younger mothers are more receptive to changing norms surrounding paternity establishment and formal child support. Among our more surprising findings is that nonmarital children who have a legal father have a substantially greater likelihood of having a support order than do marital children. Children have better child support outcomes when their mothers have fewer children, perhaps because having fewer children promotes stronger ties between noncustodial fathers and custodial mothers and children. Further examination of this relationship, including an examination of the role of birth order, is warranted. Overall, our results suggest that the likelihood of achieving a support order by two years after W-2 entry varies dramatically according to the above attributes, ranging from a low of 3 percent to a high of 80 percent, depending on the combination of characteristics.

We offer several cautions in interpreting these results. First, it is important to remember that this is a very disadvantaged population who are selected by their decision to seek public assistance. We cannot generalize from the results for this group to other groups of women and children. Furthermore, this chapter has looked only at the formal child support system, and reflects the perspective that cooperation with the formal system is the preferred outcome. Other work suggests, however, that some men provide support informally and off the books (see, e.g., Waller and Plotnick, 2001). In some cases, fathers may be incapable of providing either formal or informal support. In still other cases, there are significant psychological costs to the mother of establishing paternity and creating a formal relationship with a father with whom she would prefer to have as little to do as possible.

Despite these caveats, our results have a number of important implications for policymakers seeking to enhance the role of child support as an income source to families who come in contact with the welfare system. We offer the following conclusions from this research:

1. **Participation in the welfare system appears to increase the likelihood that children will have paternity established and be covered by support orders**. This is consistent with the child support cooperation requirements facing welfare recipients. Even after controlling for other differences, we find a strong link between the extent of the mother's AFDC experience and the likelihood of achieving these outcomes by the time of W-2 entry. Furthermore, children whose mothers are new to the welfare system show the largest gains over the subsequent two years. Qualitative research suggests, however, that regardless of formal obligations fathers whose children receive welfare are reluctant to pay support when it does not benefit the children (e.g., Waller and Plotnick, 2001; Edin, 1995); the evaluation of Wisconsin's pass-through policy suggests that the policy helps to mitigate that problem (see Volume I).

2. **Failure to establish paternity—and to a lesser extent failure to establish support orders—continue to be major limiting factors in the potential of child support as an income**

source for the welfare population. Furthermore, breakdowns at these interim stages limit the potential gains from the full pass-through policy. This is true even though Wisconsin is more successful at paternity establishment than the nation as a whole. These intermediate steps are critical because of the sequential nature of the child support process. The majority of children who do not receive support fall out of the system before an order is ever issued. Although results from the evaluation document important benefits from the full pass-through (see Volume 1), our findings regarding lack of paternity and orders indicate that many W-2 recipients do not have the opportunity to benefit from the new policy. Even two years after W-2 entry, more than half of children are not at a point in the system where they could receive formal support payments, and for these children, the pass-through is irrelevant.

3. **Several key groups of children have a low probability of successfully navigating the child support system. Groups with particularly low rates of paternity establishment, after controlling for other differences, include children of noncitizens; Hispanics, Asians and, to a lesser extent, African Americans; children in larger families; and children born to older mothers**. Learning why these children are less likely to have paternity established could lead to the development of more effective strategies to engage their families in the formal child support system. In particular, it may be possible to develop targeted outreach efforts to encourage voluntary paternity establishment among these subgroups.

4. **Support orders are surprisingly uncommon among marital children relative to eligible nonmarital children**. Although this is probably due in part to the fact that welfare recipients are a select subset of separated and divorced mothers, it is nonetheless unexpected and merits investigation. It would be informative to look more closely at separated and divorced parents who receive assistance through W-2, to determine whether there are systematic reasons that contribute to their low rates of support orders. W-2 agencies should ensure that children of separated and divorced parents are given appropriate child support attention.

5. **Efforts to bring more fathers into the formal child support system need to be sensitive to the economic realities of these men.** Our findings suggest that children whose fathers have the greatest ability to pay support are already the most likely to have paternity established and to be covered by a support order, although the differences do not appear dramatic. The fathers who have yet to be brought into the system would likely have less capacity to pay than those already involved. The full pass-through ensures that any support they pay will benefit their children. At the same time, policymakers need to have realistic expectations about the amounts of support that would be involved. In our sample, the average order covering a single child is $123 per month, and orders covering two children average $206 and orders for three children are an average of $249. To the extent that the fathers with greater ability to pay are already in the system, it is likely that new orders would be lower.

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