

How low-income single mothers and nonresidential fathers sort out responsibilities for taking care of their children remains a keen policy interest in American society. Social demographers have noted the separation of marriage from childbearing in recent decades ([Ventura & Bachrach, 2000](#)), leading current scholarly and political discourse to focus on variations in formal partner (e.g., marital) statuses in poor families and paternal involvement. However, few studies have explored the implications of the separation of intimate relations from childrearing, and we have limited insight into the processes underlying whether and how nonresidential fathers maintain involvement with unmarried mothers and their children ([Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004](#); [Waller & McLanahan, 2005](#)). Paternal involvement is particularly relevant in low-income families, in which men's providing and caregiving can help pull children out of poverty.

As single mothers, many low-income women seek out resources to support their children's well-being. Often, they turn to nonresidential fathers and related male role models to secure contributions. From this perspective, recruitment and maintenance of paternal involvement can be considered to be a strategy for unmarried women in economically disadvantaged families to be "good mothers." Unfortunately, few researchers have explored paternal involvement from the perspective of what low-income single mothers do to acquire resources for their families ([Dominguez & Watkins, 2003](#)). Survey research in particular can obscure subtle variations of men's behaviors and mothers' paternal recruitment strategies.

Following basic assumptions from a grounded theory approach ([LaRossa, 2005](#)), our goal in this analysis was to discover new theoretical perspectives on coparenting and partnering in low-income families. We modified this approach by drawing on a kinscription framework ([Stack & Burton, 1993](#)), which describes the recruitment of individuals to do family labor. We defined paternal recruitment as the negotiation of connections with a range of men (biological fathers, boyfriends, nonintimate friends, paternal and maternal kin) in order to improve children's life chances in economically disadvantaged communities. By contextualizing a critical dimension of kinscription, we examined how mothers recruited specific men to fulfill essential parenting needs. The processes of recruitment, we assert, were the first steps in mothers' negotiation of fathers' contribution to children's development.

Mothers' influence on paternal involvement in low-income families

 

Although researchers have recognized that mothers influence the roles of fathers, and more pointedly, paternal involvement with children, the nature and degree of this influence is a matter of considerable debate ([Doherty, Kouneski, & Erikson, 1998](#); [Walker & McGraw, 2000](#)). The concept of maternal gatekeeping has been used to describe primarily exclusionary measures, such as mothers' motivations to monitor, discourage, or deflect men's interaction with children ([Allen & Hawkins, 1999](#)). Gatekeeping has emerged from studies with a primary focus on residential, married couples, most of whom have been middle-class and European American ([Allen &](#)

[Hawkins, 1999](#); [DeLuccie, 2001](#); see [Fagan & Barnett, 2003](#) for exception). [Pleck and Masciadrelli \(2004\)](#) noted that many gatekeeping studies have linked discouragement of paternal involvement to mothers' attitudes but rarely to actual family processes.

Studies of unmarried parents in economically disadvantaged families, in contrast, have often relied on rational choice models to account for mothers' efforts to secure resources from fathers. [Wilson \(1987\)](#) described mothers' attempts to secure potential marital partners (and contributors to children's well-being) with the concept of the limited marriageability pool for low-income African American women. [Edin and Lein \(1997\)](#) noted women's packaging of resources by requiring fathers to "pay to stay," to contribute to a household in exchange for an intimate relationship. Like gatekeeping studies, these studies on low-income families did not broadly capture the range of processes of mothers' encouragement and discouragement of male involvement across a wide array of family configurations.

As an alternative approach, studies of women's kinwork have conceptualized how mothers ensure their children's well-being and influence men's family involvement. [DiLeonardo \(1987\)](#) identified "keeping families together" as the core of women's work activities (including household labor, child/elder care, and market labor) that require the women to embody a mix of altruism and self-interest. Others have described being a kinkeeper as encompassing emotional work, communication activities, physical labor, and financial obligations ([Gerstel & Gallagher, 1993](#); [Rosenthal, 1985](#)). Previous research also revealed that mothers have identified, created, maintained, and even dissolved a range of supportive kin networks for daily survival and social mobility of their families ([Nelson, 2000](#); [Stack, 1974](#)). Further, these mothers worked to advocate and improve their children's life chances by personalizing connections with significant kinworkers, usually grandmothers, sisters, aunts and friends ([Glenn, Chang, & Forcey, 1994](#)).

Focused recruitment of men into kinwork roles is a distinct advocacy strategy that could potentially enhance families, although we recognize the ambivalence of such involvement. [Stack \(1974\)](#) demonstrated how even the establishment of paternity itself could bring resources to mothers and their children through the contributions of paternal kin. However, family members also felt that poor men drained valuable resources that help sustain family systems ([Stack, 1974](#)), and they held tight to time-proven mental representations of low-income fathers as "renegade relatives" ([Stack & Burton, 1993](#), p. 164) who do more harm than good.

Indeed, there is some evidence that low-income men's transitions in residences, relationships, and employment put low-income families at risk for loss of resources, conflict, and potential abuse ([Sano, 2004](#); [Waller & Swisher, in press](#)). Specifically, fathers often are obligated to more than one set of nonresident and/or resident children ([Manning, Stewart, & Smock, 2003](#); [Roy, 1999](#)). According to researchers ([Edin, 2000](#); [Edin & Kefalas, 2005](#)), some single mothers believe that low wages combined with inconsistent employment render poor men unprepared for family relationships. Despite these risks, mothers have been found to tailor flexible paternal roles in multigenerational

African American families to expand the range of men who can contribute to children's well-being ([Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002](#)).

The present study

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This analysis draws from the kinscripts framework ([Stack & Burton, 1993](#)), which situates kinwork within complex family relationships over time. This framework shifts the focus of study from mother/father relationships to extrafamilial relationships constructed to enhance children's well-being ([Crosbie-Burnett & Lewis, 1999](#)). Based on the experiences of multigenerational African American families, a kinwork perspective acknowledges family members' ongoing actions to "regenerate families, maintain lifetime continuities, sustain intergenerational responsibilities, and reinforce shared values" ([Stack & Burton, 1993](#), p. 160). Family scripts guide social expectations and lead to efficiency and consistency in taking care of family responsibilities ([Byng-Hall, 1985, 1988](#)). We theorized that paternal recruitment is a critical dimension of mothers' kinscription efforts and has relevance for both their own and their children's well-being.

Previous studies have limited their focus to the need for men's instrumental contributions, typically financial resources for themselves and their children ([Gibson, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005](#); [Kotchick, Dorsey, & Heller, 2005](#); [Mincy, Garfinkel, & Nepomnyaschy, 2005](#); [Roy, 1999](#)). However, other studies have indicated that mothers also need a contribution of time to provide care from trustworthy kinworkers. [Roy, Tubbs, and Burton \(2004\)](#) identified how low-income mothers in Chicago sought relief from the demands of food preparation, transportation, and grooming activities in 24-hr child care. Low-income single mothers also sought out the guidance that fathers provided for their children and the emotional support that they offered to them as mothers who parented alone ([Jarrett et al., 2002](#)).

To summarize, this study explored low-income single mothers' recruitment of men as an open-ended and contested process, inclusive of multiple family needs and multiple actors. We defined recruitment as the negotiation of connections with a range of men (biological fathers, boyfriends, nonintimate friends, paternal and maternal kin) in order to improve children's life chances in economically disadvantaged communities. To explore the processes of recruitment, we asked how did low-income mothers involve nonresidential fathers and other men to fulfill family needs? Specifically, we examined three processes that emerged in analyses of interview data:

Single mothers' negotiated legitimacy of normative expectations for men;

Mothers' reconciliation of the overlap of maternal advocacy with the demands of intimate relationships;

Mothers' minimization of risks to their children during recruitment.

Methods

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Overview and participant recruitment

Using ethnographic data from the *Welfare, Children and Families: A Three-City Study*, we explored strategies women employ to recruit men's support for children in 149 African American, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic White low-income families. The data on mothers' strategies for recruiting father and father-figure support derived from the ethnographic component of *Welfare, Children and Families: A Three-City Study*. This study was carried out over a period of 4 years in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio to monitor the consequences of welfare reform for the well-being of children and families. This multisite study integrated survey, developmental, and ethnographic components. A detailed description of the *Three-City Study* and a series of reports are available at <http://www.jhu.edu/~welfare>.

Families who participated in the ethnographic components of *The Three-City Study* were recruited between June 1999 and December 2000. Recruitment sites included formal childcare settings (e.g., Head Start), the Women, Infants, and Children program, neighborhood community and youth centers, churches, local welfare offices, and other social service agencies. Multiple neighborhoods in each city were targeted for recruitment, based on compatibility with probability sampling areas used to recruit participants for *The Three-City Study* survey component.

All families who participated in the ethnographic study ($N = 256$ families) had household incomes at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002](#)). Most mothers were eligible for receipt of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), although some mothers whose income was slightly above poverty level represented working poor families who experienced many of the contextual impacts of poverty in low-income neighborhoods. Of the 256 families who participated, 44 families were recruited for interviews and observation because they included a child less than 8 years of age with a moderate to severe disability. We did not include these families in our analysis due to the unique strategies of paternal recruitment associated with children's disabilities. The remaining subsample of 212 families included a child aged 2–4 years; further, we selected families with nonresidential fathers or father figures during the first year of the study ($N = 149$, or 70% of total sample; see [Table 1](#)). Within this subsample, 42% ($n = 62$) of the families were of Hispanic ethnicity (includes Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, and Central Americans), 39% were African American ($n = 58$), and 19% were non-Hispanic White ($n = 29$).

For this analysis, we used ethnographic data collected during the first year of the *Three-City Study*, when most mother/father unions were tenuous and formative. In early years with young children, couples reported experiencing high expectations, bitter disappointments, conflict, and union dissolution. The early phases of data collection were conducted at the height of welfare reform, when low-income women were required to

identify the fathers of their children in order to receive aid. We acknowledge the possibility that the identification of welfare-eligible children's biological fathers may have influenced parenting and partnering interaction between mothers and nonresident fathers.

Ethnographic methodology

Structured discovery. The ethnography employed a method of structured discovery in which in-depth interviews and observations focused on specific topics but allowed flexibility to capture unexpected findings and relationships among topics ([Burton, Skinner, & Matthews, 2005](#); [Winston et al., 1999](#)). The interviews addressed child development, parenting, and intimate relationships; health and health access; experiences with TANF and other public assistance programs; education, work experiences and future plans; family economics; support networks; family routines; and home and neighborhood environments. Ethnographers also engaged in participant observation, accompanying mothers and their children to the welfare office, doctor, hospital, clinic, or workplace, and noting both context and interactions. Ethnographers met with each family once or twice each month, on average, for 12–18 months, with follow-up interviews at 6 months and 1 year after the 18-month intensive period. Mothers were compensated with grocery or department store vouchers for each interview and participant observation visit. Pseudonyms, not actual names, were cited in this study.

Guided by a process model of parenting with contextual sources of social support ([Belsky, 1984](#)), we identified three types of family needs that mothers reported were critical for children's well-being: material support (including financial contributions), child care, and emotional support and guidance of children. Our definition of "father" was rooted in mothers' discussion of men in daily family life, as well as direct observations of fathers by ethnographers whenever possible. Mothers identified fathers either through explicit reference "the father of my children" or implicit statements about father-like behavior "he's around a lot, and my daughter likes to play with him."

Coding and analyses. Multiple sources of data were used for our analysis of mothers' recruitment. Field ethnographers in each city wrote field notes, including transcribed interviews and observations from family interactions. Interview transcripts, field notes, and other documents were coded for entry into a qualitative data management software application and summarized into a case profile for each family. The software program and case profiles enabled counts across the entire sample as well as detailed analysis of individual cases.

For this analysis, notes and profiles were reviewed for mothers' reports of efforts to involve men in children's lives. We identified these reports in general discussion of mothers' and children's interactions with men, as well as in discussions of intimate relationships, social support, and kinwork. We enhanced data credibility and dependability ([Lincoln & Guba, 1985](#)) through prolonged engagement in the field, repeat coding techniques, member checks with participants, and triangulation through multiple data sources and multiple methods of data collection.

Three waves of coding were conducted on complete sets of data for each family. First, field notes and family profiles were open coded with common codes and sensitizing concepts. Next, coding patterns were examined within and across all families, using axial coding techniques adapted from constant comparison methods of analytic induction (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We identified three processes of recruitment: (a) search for conventional fathers and partners, (b) maternal advocacy and implications for intimate relationships, and (c) protection of children and reduction of risks. We also examined the conditions and contexts that shaped these recruitment processes. In the final phase of selective coding, we identified recruitment as the core category of our analyses (LaRossa, 2005). Last, we integrated patterns of variation in recruitment processes across all 149 cases to develop theoretical insight into the broader process of kinscription of men in low-income families.

Findings

 

In this section, we describe the contexts for mothers' recruitment of paternal involvement. We specify the range of complex family configurations that include a range and multiplicity of potential fathers and father figures. We also briefly indicate the prevalence of family needs that were indicated by mothers in the study. Each of the three emergent recruitment processes will be explored. First, we examine the search for conventional fathers and partners, including beliefs about, monitoring of, and barriers to a "gold standard" of involved fathering. Second, we assess how mothers' advocacy shaped intimate relationships with biological fathers and nonbiological partners. Third, we follow mothers' efforts to minimize risks to themselves and their children, through subsequent recruitment of nonintimate father figures and legacies with paternal kin.

Contexts for Recruitment

Complex family configurations. Mothers pursued support with nonresidential biological fathers, new partners in intimate relationships, male friends and family members in nonintimate relationships, and paternal kin (including paternal grandmothers)—in this order of priority. Children in this sample of low-income families received care and contributions from multiple men. Across all 149 families, 299 men were identified as involved fathers (approximately two men in each family context). In fact, two or more biological fathers were involved in about 40% of the families ($n = 61$).

The majority of men that mothers identified in their families were biological fathers who lived permanently outside of households (62% of all men, $n = 186$) or who moved in and out of households frequently (14%, $n = 42$). Nonresidential biological fathers were usually the first recruits that mothers approached for support and involvement with their children. Just less than 20% of all involved men that mothers acknowledged (18%, $n = 53$) were their unmarried partners.

By considering contributions of male friends and family members outside of intimate relationships (6%, $n = 18$), mothers located more supportive male figures for short-term and limited "bridge" care. Mothers also sought relationships with women in paternal kin networks (25%, $n = 37$). Among this group, twice as many Hispanic (26%, $n = 15$) and African American mothers (29%, $n = 18$) recruited paternal kin compared with European American mothers (14%, $n = 4$).

Family needs. Mothers requested a range of supports from this complex configuration of kin members. We noted three family needs that mothers hoped to achieve through recruitment of men to support the development of children, including (a) material support, (b) trustworthy child care, and (c) emotional support and guidance (see [Table 2](#)). Material support, both financial and in-kind, was the most common goal for recruiting fathers. Over three quarters of mothers (78%, $n = 116$) explicitly mentioned that providing financial and in-kind support for children was the nonnegotiable duty of all fathers. Over half of the mothers in the study (56%, $n = 83$) indicated that they looked for trusted kin members to offer limited hours for child care, often between day care or school schedules. One third of the mothers in this sample also discussed the need for a father's emotional support as a coparent and guidance as a role model for children (32%, $n = 47$). There were no significant differences by race/ethnicity for mothers' reports of family needs.

Given the complexity of family configurations and multiple family needs, we examined how mothers recruited men in these contexts. In the following sections, we develop a model of three related recruitment processes for low-income single mothers in our sample (see [Figure 1](#) on next page).

Search for conventional fathers and partners

Low-income mothers aspired to conventional parenthood like other families in American society ([Anderson, 1990](#); [Edin, 2000](#)). Given limited economic opportunities, however, parenthood not only preceded marriage but often occurred in the absence of a committed relationship altogether ([Jarrett et al., 2002](#)). In these circumstances, mothers in this study sought to recruit men who could fulfill some of the most basic expectations of fatherhood.

Legitimacy through "that gold standard." Mothers referred to being brought up with traditional family values, with gendered divisions of work in their families. Normative father roles fit easily into this vision. For example, Sonya, a 24-year-old African American mother of three children in Boston, was raised to aspire to "that gold standard, you know—that there should be a mother in the home, a father at work. She should cook, clean, and nurture the kids, while the man provided for his family and provided discipline." If fathers were recruited and maintained some level of involvement with their children, mothers believed that they could be "strong influences" who could emerge as role models for their children.

For poor mothers without partners, just the presence of a father in the household conveyed a strong sense of social legitimacy for themselves and their children. Yolanda, a 40-year-old mother in Chicago, tried repeatedly to involve the biological father of her infant son, through appeals to join her and become "a real family ... I want to have a normal family." For Yolanda, "it had to be him, there is no one else that could fit, I can't imagine anyone else playing [his] father." Even after the father moved to New York, she intended to ask him to move back in with her and her son. She firmly believed that her son knew his estranged father by his smell, insisting "la sangre llama" ("blood calls") to children.

Mothers responded to their children's sense of legitimacy as well. Children wanted to identify who their fathers were, and this line of questioning led mothers to reflect on the impact of recruiting men as fathers. Tanya, an African American mother in Boston, grew increasingly ambivalent about remaining a single parent. "[My daughter Cara] asks me questions about where her father is ... What would it be like if there was someone in the house for her?" Tanya also recognized that a father could ease the "emotional burden" of being a single parent. She said, "I blame myself at times for a father not being there, but I try not to think about it, because I've got to do everything I can for my daughter."

Mothers often framed recruitment as the responsibility that biological fathers had to their children. For men with resources, this appeal for legitimacy was persuasive and could lead to their consistent interaction in families. Carla, a young Latina mother in Chicago with a 4-year-old daughter and 18-month-old twin sons, was able to maintain a supportive relationship with her ex-husband. In addition to paying \$100 in weekly child support, he remained integrally involved as a caregiver for his children. He stopped by at the family's apartment after work every day at 4 pm, ate dinner with the family frequently, and took his daughter to stay with him at his parents' house on weekends. Carla had emphasized that he needed to take care of his children who "he had brought into this world."

Monitoring and accountability. However, such arrangements were typically short lived, and mothers needed to monitor men and hold them accountable for their involvement. For example, it was a common discussion among mothers in the study that "[the biological father] has no right to see his children unless he's contributing." Since material support was usually the most urgent family need, it was also the breaking point for many recruitment strategies. Samora, a young Latina mother in San Antonio, regretted that she had to monitor the work activities of the biological father of her 3-year-old son. She could not believe that "he's working [in a car lot] and he's 6, 7 months behind in payment. He doesn't act like a daddy." When recruitment of men grew volatile and/or too complicated, mothers could find that their roles as coordinators were "too much hassle" for too little material support.

Paternal involvement also required a level of maturity and commitment that went beyond simple material support. Gisella, a Puerto Rican mother in Chicago, held onto her high expectations and grew frustrated at the lack of responsibility of her baby's father. He moved back and forth to Puerto Rico repeatedly, without direction and with little

ambition. Eventually, he served 5 months in jail, and he did not seem intent on maintaining his relationship with his infant daughter. Gisella adamantly refused to let him sign the birth certificate or to give the baby his last name, saying "When he shows me that he can be a father, then he can sign."

Barriers to recruitment and lowered expectations. The common experience of incarceration was one of the most critical barriers to achieving conventional roles through recruitment. Almost 20% of the families in the study reported that at least one nonresidential father or intimate partner was incarcerated. As with Gisella, it was difficult for mothers to maintain recruitment efforts when men were incarcerated; despite their best intentions, men could not confer legitimacy as conventional parents when they were in jail, prison, or work release.

The dynamic context of immigration presented another disruption to mothers' efforts to link fathers with children. The ambiguity of residency status, the search for jobs, and return home to visit or care for family members across international borders shaped recruitment strategies for Mexican and Puerto Rican families. Even though Clarissa moved into an apartment in Boston with Alex, the biological father of their young son, she never felt comfortable as a "conventional" family.

He has done very little for our son. He told me never to leave him alone with the baby. But I don't want to take the baby's father away from him. Family is very important to me—maybe this is why I let it continue. Latino men learned American values when they [came to the States], so that [they believe] "nobody can depend on me, what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours." If he leaves us, I will continue living.

Clarissa believed that most men had partners in the States and at home, in Puerto Rico. Alex, in fact, had an older son from a previous relationship, and he continued to send money to his sisters and to his son. A year later, he returned from a visit to Puerto Rico with his older son, who "had no one to care for him." Clarissa confronted him about the differences in how he treated his two sons, but he misinterpreted her comments, assuming that she did not want his older son to stay with them. Eventually, Alex returned to Puerto Rico with his older son, built a house, and cut off ties with Clarissa and her child.

A third barrier to recruitment for legitimacy was men's commitments to multiple kin networks. Many men continued to live with their aging parents and were partially responsible for their parents' well-being. Mothers often felt that this commitment was wrongly placed when men had their own children. Mothers also feared that support from successfully recruited fathers would grow tenuous if these men had children with a new partner. For example, one mother described her ex-partner as a "good father" who contributed diapers, clothes, and other important resources, and cared for his children nightly and during weekends. However, she was concerned that he would "wash his hands of us" when his current partner gave birth.

The expectations for conventional fatherhood could be set too high for most men in low-income families, and some mothers lowered expectations for involvement. Consistent

contributions were a challenge for low-income men who did not have access to good jobs. Sabine, a 23-year-old African American mother of two daughters, focused on the efforts, not the contributions, of their biological father. She described Earl as "a good man" when he took them shopping for clothes, shoes, and food or "put money in a savings account for their future." Earl abused drugs on and off for 7 years, but she gave him credit for doing "the right thing" and giving what he could when he was "clean." Similarly, Juanita, a young mother of two preschoolers in San Antonio, settled for the efforts of her baby's father, despite his commitment to three other children. "Just as long as he sees his daughter," she said, "That's what's important. He's part of her life. I'd rather have him part of her life than giving me money and not coming around at all."

For both these mothers, some involvement was better than none. They took advantage of what one mother described as "what was offered, when it was offered." Men who even tried to achieve conventional success as fathers put their families a step closer to "that gold standard" of legitimacy. As one mother argued, "Any help is welcome, from any of these men. I need to bring them all along." In effect, many mothers felt that they had little choice but to encourage a complicated configuration of men to become involved, even if accepting inconsistent contributions led to ambiguity and conflict in their lives.

Maternal advocacy and implications for intimate relationships

If "bringing [men] along" as involved *parents* proved problematic, mothers' advocacy had even more complicated implications for men as potential intimate *partners*. As [DiLeonardo \(1987\)](#) suggested, the early stages of kinwork (in this case, recruitment of fathers) unfolded in fits and starts, competition and cooperation, and guilt and gratification. Negotiation over men's involvement left open the question of how participation in children's lives would lead, or not lead, to intimacy, companionship, and long-term commitment. For mothers, advocacy for children's well-being was infused with self-interest, as the promise of a conventional father folded into the promise of a conventional partner.

In the next section, we examine implications for relationships with biological fathers and intimate partners separately. Mothers' recruitment appeals were tailored to biological imperatives (with biological fathers) or social opportunities (with intimate partners).

Investments and "settling" for biological fathers. When mothers pursued the involvement of their children's biological fathers, they recognized the significant investment of work and emotion, often over many years, that shaped their recruitment. Due to this "history," most mothers gave priority to the recruitment of biological fathers. However, reinvolvement of biological fathers opened negotiation over intimate relations, and mothers struggled to redefine their relationships. Clarissa (above) found that her relationship with her son's father could not be defined with conventional descriptions of marital partner or coparent.

Marriage is what women dream about, society asks that of a woman, or the economic situation, or love, but more than anything, to get married by God's law is a serious

compromise. But [Alex] is my *marido*—like a companion or a boyfriend ... In Latino countries, the man gets a house for the woman, but things are different here—a man moves into a woman's house. The relationship has changed now—it's like a schedule, I get up, clean, he goes to work, I cook, take care of Justin ... I'm trying to hold the relationship together for Justin. I'm not confident we'll remain together.

When mothers appealed to recruit biological fathers for involvement with their children, as Clarissa did, they often explicitly communicated the imperative that biological fathers must support their children. These appeals could imply that intimate relationships were "back on track." The implications were often unintended, and few mothers accepted them without question. Karen, a 45-year-old European American mother of two young children, relied solely on her own father for child care while she worked. Upon his death, she regrettably appealed for her ex-husband's involvement "for the kids."

I work at night, and I needed to find someone new. It's easier for him to move back in. I'm not entirely happy with the situation—it's more economical, more for the kids than for me. Our relationship has not really improved but Beth and Brian are happy to have him around. Unless he makes changes—stop drinking, his swearing, his work ethic—I don't actually see myself with him. But I don't have time to meet anyone new. I really just need his help. I'm tired of worrying about having enough money and resources for my kids. I tried living on my own, went on welfare for a few months, but I can't make ends meet. I went into credit debt and thought about filing bankruptcy. I just don't know how single mothers are supposed to work full-time and take care of children.

Mothers could make their relationships contingent on men fulfilling expectations as good providers and caregivers. One mother in Chicago asked her baby's father to move in, even after he cheated on her. But she insisted, "We're not really 'together' together. I told him, 'The only way you're going to stay here is if you pay all the bills, do everything.' " If the potential for financial contribution faded, mothers then dampened recruitment strategies and ended relationships. After her children's father lost his job at the tail end of 4 years of engagement, Katherine, a European American mother in Boston, ultimately rejected his marriage proposal.

Although these mothers described recruitment through clear-cut offers to "pay to stay" ([Edin & Lein, 1997](#)), the daily process of recruitment was actually quite open ended. Most mothers had few alternatives to their heavy investments with biological fathers, and they could not readily anticipate the consequences of their appeal for paternal involvement. Rejection of biological fathers meant letting go of the chance of legitimacy with fathers as well as the promise of marriage with a partner. Yesenia was a young Chicago mother with five children, and she secured a restraining order for 18 months against the children's biological father, after he served 3 months in jail for a domestic violence offense. However, she still needed someone to watch her children when she was at work during the day.

I'm trying to give him a second chance. We've been doing well since he came back, we're much happier. He's promised not to drink. But that makes his temper short, and I don't

want him to lash out, so we don't talk very much. He's helping more around the house, doing things that needed to be done for some time now. I want this to work out, for the kids' sake. He's a great father and the kids love him. I don't mind him being back, and they really missed him.

Looking for "more" with intimate partners. Men who were not the biological fathers of children did not carry a history of disappointments. They represented the chance to start again, with the promise of legitimacy. Mothers downplayed the message of recruitment for paternal involvement and explicitly communicated the social opportunity of a promising relationship with a good man. However, the often unspoken implications were, as one mother said, that "A relationship with me is not an option if [the guy] doesn't support my kids—they come first." For example, Valerie had completed an alcoholic anonymous (AA) course after splitting up with the father of her sons. She had begun to develop a relationship with another AA member who lived in sober housing. "He's divorced, with two kids, a good job," she said, "And I like spending time with him—he's intelligent, he's a good conversationalist." Valerie backed up her assessment by noting that "he supports his children too, he hasn't run out on them. That's good for my kids. He's a good catch."

For some mothers, material support from intimate partners led to the end of reliance on inconsistent contributions or conflict with biological fathers. New partners gave mothers renewed confidence, as well as scarce resources needed to nurture children. Eva, a young Latina mother of three preschool-age children in San Antonio, left her abusive former partner, who threatened to pursue custody. Her new fiancé's consistent financial contributions and offers to help with child care allowed Eva to avoid contacting her former partner for financial support or child care. Her ability to move past a threatening relationship was contingent on the involvement of her fiancé with her children.

On the other hand, renewed support from biological fathers could lead mothers to look more critically at the limits of relationships with intimate partners. Kate, a European American mother of a 2-year-old son, began to receive formal child support and regular child care from the father of her child, while her live-in partner contributed little. She tolerated her partner's lack of commitment for a few months before ending their relationship, "for not offering anything to me and my kids." Kim, an African American mother in Boston, reflected on the necessity of companionship, in the context of limitations of both biological fathers and potential partners.

I'm lonely. I know with that touch, I can stop working on myself ... But I've learned that no man can destroy me. Men don't see my heart—they're just looking to take from me. With all my kids' fathers, what got me first was they'd give me money and take me out. But then that ended, and it was more as if they were another one of my children. I'm not having it, I can't grow with someone like that. It's not my responsibility to believe in my kids' fathers and make them constantly accountable to their children. Men can get away with it—they do me like that.

As Clarissa noted, "what society/economics/love/God asks of" women—to find involved fathers and partners—propelled some mothers to continue to seek men for support of children and themselves. The conflation of intimate relations and parenting often led them to accept the risks of some men's involvement. Kris, a mother of five children, knew that "when my kids needed a father figure, I tried to find one ... I tried to make sure that there is a man in my life that loved me and respected me and loved my kids." She was consumed with finding legitimacy and stability with a father and partner and in turn entered into relationships with three men who abused her and her children. Kris held onto her ideals and blamed herself, in spite of the damage that these men had brought into her family's lives: "It was my fault maybe, and I'm sorry for ruining my kids' lives."

Protection of children and reduction of risks

Recruitment of father figures as alternatives. Negotiations to recruit biological fathers and intimate partners proved to be exhausting for mothers in low-income families, and they often put women and children at risk for abuse or gaps in material or caregiving supports. The recruitment of men in nonintimate relationships offered alternative choices. Although only 6% of all the men identified in the sample were nonintimate relations, they offered critical short-term and "bridge" care options for mothers. Mothers explored web chat rooms, workplaces, parties, and neighborhood gathering places to elicit the support of male acquaintances and close friends. Once involved, the loss of these father figures could be "devastating." Lucy, a pregnant Mexican American mother of four children, lost her home and moved into a family shelter. At the shelter, a new friend, Sean, convinced her to not put her baby up for adoption, and 3 years later had assumed the title of "father" for her daughter. Lucy insisted that Sean was "the only constant person in my life."

By recruiting a network of fathers and father figures, mothers secured a consistent web of support that would not put their children at risk for lack of resources. Emma, a 50-year-old European American grandmother in Boston, agreed that "Daddy" was a complicated term for Sunny, her 4-year-old custodial granddaughter. Sunny did not live or interact regularly with her biological father or her mother's new boyfriend, but her uncle and her stepgrandfather were both "Daddy" because they shared a household with her. At a picnic on Father's Day, Emma celebrated the efforts of fathers in the extended family, including these four men as well as seven other men with children (her father-in-law, her husband's brother and his son, a son by her first husband, her brother, her nephew, and her next-door neighbor). Paternal involvement with Sunny was shared among a number of men, most of whom were non-kin related father figures. Expectations for their involvement were kept vague and fluid, based on who was there and which needs arose. With a complex array of father figures, Emma flexibly tailored parenting needs to the demands of shifting residence, employment, and care arrangements.

In the aftermath of dissolved relationships with biological fathers and intimate partners, many mothers could only trust "the men of my family." Mothers and their male siblings set up regular swaps of child care in reciprocal care arrangements. Like some women, Crystal, a 45-year-old African American mother in Chicago, turned to her older sons to care for her younger children, whose biological fathers were incarcerated. In Boston,

Jamilla recruited her godfather to care for and play with her child. After a few months, her boyfriend and the child's biological father returned to the neighborhood, and her godfather's obligations faded out. Again, the commitments of father figures typically were limited in focus and short-term in duration.

Recruitment and legacies of paternal kin. [Stack \(1974\)](#) found that paternal kin were activated in the lives of mothers and children through the basic act of paternity establishment. For mothers in this study, explicit recruitment of paternal kin ensured the continuation of this support. The involvement of paternal kin did not reintroduce unwanted intimacies and was often more trustworthy, in part due to the commitment of "women who are mothers in *his* family." Paternal grandmothers were central figures in an "as-needed" optional daycare network for many mothers, as well as purchasers of clothing and sole custodians for children during emergency situations. Men's brothers and sisters were confidantes for both parents on parenting, jobs, and money matters, as well as caregivers who could offer weekend visits to households filled with cousins. If direct paternal involvement was problematic, mothers made direct appeals for housing or financial assistance to paternal kin who felt obligated to children through biological ties. Young mothers also lived with paternal grandparents to remain in school during the early years after birth.

When biological fathers completely fell out of their children's lives, paternal kin often felt compelled to take up responsibility for care and support of their youngest family members. Billie, an African American mother of 3- and 6-year-old daughters in Chicago, encouraged one of her children's fathers to contribute whatever financial support he could, but due to his incarceration, she had to rely more heavily on another of her children's fathers. He and his mother cared for all of her children regularly, bought her and the children clothes, and, in a crisis, supported the family with money when Billie's welfare benefits were terminated.

However, recruitment of paternal kin could become problematic and even unproductive for some mothers. Many mothers grew critical when the involvement of paternal kin enabled biological fathers to be seen as "involved parents" despite not being involved. Cassandra, a young European American mother in Chicago, was separated from the Puerto Rican father of her two children, and she minimized her former partner's contributions, saying, "He's a chicken daddy—his family watches my baby, and he gets the credit."

A few mothers went beyond ordinary measures to secure a paternal family legacy for their children's sense of identity and development. Francesca, a 22-year-old European American mother in Boston, maintained a strong relationship with the family of Roberto, her daughter's father. She communicated regularly by phone with them in the Dominican Republic and eventually saved enough money to visit with her daughter. Francesca wanted her daughter to know her 5-year-old half brother and agreed to have him come visit her and her daughter for periods of time as he grew up. Some mothers stopped trying to recruit men for support and opted to recruit paternal kin directly. For example, Javier denied his biological ties to his son, but after positive DNA identification, Yolanda

photocopied the test results and mailed them to his mother and sisters in Mexico. She explained that "esto es por si todavia dudan ... this is in case they still doubt [who the father is]."

Through recruitment of biological fathers, intimate partners, nonintimate male friends, and paternal kin, mothers were engaged in a process of minimizing risks for their children. Mothers usually gave priority to pursuing recruitment in this order as well. For example, Lorena, a 29-year-old Puerto Rican mother of three children, moved to Boston after a string of abusive relationships with the biological fathers of her children. She chose not to rely on her new partner for financial support, however, and found that friends and her children's paternal kin offered inconsistent support at best. After a few years, Lorena moved South to look for better jobs. The exhausting and often risky process of recruitment of fathers and father figures was no longer an option. Instead, she relied solely on her own employment and personal resources for her children. For 30% of the *Three-City Study* families who were not involved in this analysis, mothers may have opted out of recruitment of fathers and father figures for similar reasons.

Discussion

In [Figure 1](#), we outline a model for three related processes in the recruitment of fathers by low-income single mothers in our sample. First, mothers seek legitimacy through recruiting men to fulfill conventional roles as good fathers and good partners/husbands. For single mothers in nontraditional family structures, involved fathers offer a chance for social legitimacy. Second, mothers negotiate how the needs for maternal advocacy shape potential intimate relationships. As single parents, negotiation of intimate relationships is particularly contested. As in the cases of Yesenia, Karen, and Gisella in our analysis, mothers struggle to understand how the search for ideal fathers is linked to the status of these men as partners. In this area of overlap of these two processes, recruitment is marked by men who could not live up to conventional expectations as fathers, and who are often risks as partners as well. Finally, mothers try to minimize risks to their children at every step of recruitment. If they are unable to secure conventional fathers or to find intimate partners who contribute to their families, they often turn to nonintimate friends and acquaintances, men in their own families, or paternal kin as options for involvement.

In effect, recruitment of fathers is a way of mothering for single, economically disadvantaged women. In spite of "hassles" from men in their lives, women advocate for their children and often themselves. In the model (see [Figure 1](#)), the first two processes are placed "inside" the third and the arrows suggest a preferred sequence: first, mothers begin recruitment efforts with biological fathers, using the explicit message of conventional involvement; second, they struggle to define how their family needs are shaped by potential intimate relationships. As mothers move away from these strategies, they continue to minimize risks through involvement of nonintimate family members and friends.

This model of recruitment contributes to new theory development about parenting and partnering. First, it offers insight into family processes in low-income communities. A sole focus on men's financial support in previous studies has limited understanding of mothers' strategies to enhance their children's well-being. We found, in contrast to the rather clear-cut process of "no pay, no stay" ([Edin & Lein, 1997](#)), that mothers are often unsure of the consequences of asking potential partners to contribute financially to their children or to care for their children. Moreover, it proved difficult to transform a relationship based on men's financial contributions into a parental commitment to emotional support, child care, or role modeling.

Often, it is assumed that mothers are at fault when gaps emerge in caregiving practices for children ([Garey, 1999](#)). Recruitment strategies aim to fill gaps in resources and care but also to reallocate and dissolve "blame." In this study, mothers encouraged men's efforts, symbolic and otherwise, to ensure that children feel wanted and that mothers are "not the only one" who is responsible for family well-being. The processes of mothers' recruitment also challenge us to reconsider the limited concept of maternal gatekeeping. Low-income mothers recognized real barriers that men faced as providers and caregivers. Despite frustration in not being able to count on men's support, women often did not "give up" on fathers and returned to encourage their efforts. Similar to studies of emotion work in father/child relationships ([Seery & Crowley, 2000](#)), mothers praised men's involvement and crafted positive images for fathers.

However, these previous conceptualizations do not entirely account for the necessity for disadvantaged mothers to solicit and cultivate support. To reconceptualize caregiving in contemporary families, [Garey, Hansen, Hertz, and MacDonald \(2002\)](#) directed attention to patterns of interdependence within families. In this study, mothers created scripts for men's kinwork roles, informed by different family needs. They also crafted bonds of reciprocity that were flexible enough to allow for inconsistent support as well as minimal "efforts" at support.

Second, low-income single mothers had to negotiate men's involvement, and these negotiations led to complex family configurations. There are clear patterns of which family needs are most important across racial/ethnic groups (material support being the most common need, see [Table 2](#)), but the pathways to secure these needs are diverse. A structured discovery approach allows us to consider a full range of relationships without making assumptions about who performed paternal roles. For example, recruitment, unlike gatekeeping, is not confined to marital relationships; if mothers exclude nonresidential biological fathers from involvement, they recruit other men or paternal kin to support children's well-being. By identifying conditions in which biological fathers, intimate partners, male friends and family members, and paternal kin participate as kinworkers, this study extends theory development on men's fulfillment of normative roles ([Townsend, 2002](#)) for a single biological child.

Recruitment is also shaped by life circumstances for low-income fathers. In particular, men's immigration patterns ([Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993](#)) force mothers to shift and supplement their strategies to secure material support across international borders and

multiple family systems. In addition, incarceration removes many potential fathers and father figures from children's lives ([Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003](#); [Nurse, 2002](#)). Paternal kin step up often during incarceration, as do other biological fathers, for children within the same family; however, men's job instability, physical abuse, and substance use increasingly lead mothers to assess how the risks may outstrip the benefits of often inconsistent paternal involvement ([Sano, 2004](#)).

Finally, our findings show that mothers recruit men to secure support in specific times and places. This model is attuned to specific historical and developmental contexts in the first stages of kinscription. These are not long-standing relationships between mothers and biological fathers, and these men and women were often unfamiliar with what would be demanded of them during the first few years of coparenting with young children. Further, these fragile relationships unfolded at the height of pressure to identify paternity under new provisions of welfare reform in the late 1990s.

This study focused principally on mothers' reports of the recruitment process. Further studies should synthesize mothers' perspectives with fathers' perspectives on their own active participation in recruitment and kinwork. However, this weakness is also a strength of the study. When fathers do not live in family households and remain sporadically involved with children, mothers may become one of the primary interpreters of fathers' viability for young children. As such, mothers' perceptions closely shape expectations for a wide range of men's parenting, and they are important reflections of what young children learn about nonresidential fathers.

We expected to find more about how the context of welfare reform shaped mothers' strategies of recruitment. Mothers spoke more openly about kinscription over time, as trust grew between participants and ethnographers in the *Three-City Study*. Initially, mothers used informal systems as recruitment strategies, and formal systems (such as child support) came into play over time. Therefore, future analyses will hopefully detail the "next steps" of kinscription processes, as children age and as women's financial situations change. We will take advantage of longitudinal data (through the end of data collection) to systematically examine kinscription strategies that mothers used to maintain, supplement, sanction, and dissolve men's involvement over time (including direct appeals through familial networks and indirect strategies through institutional systems, such as child support). Patterns in the timing, pace, and degree of recruitment strategies will be addressed, with attention to how mothers tailor appeals for involvement to specific characteristics of children, and how strategies are simultaneously or sequentially utilized by mothers.

Findings may help guide large-scale survey research on parenting in low-income families, suggesting a range of effective recruitment strategies that may result in paternal involvement and, ultimately, in promotion of child well-being. Moreover, these findings may offer ways to clearly conceptualize the separation of intimate relations from childbearing. They suggest the need for further exploration of how tensions emerge during negotiated connections of men as partners and coparents in low-income families.

Implications for policy and practice

Go to section 

This study has important policy and program implications for unmarried mothers, nonresidential fathers, and economically disadvantaged children. Many mothers cope with lack of adequate support for their families by recruiting fathers for their contributions. Through child support regulations, state and federal agencies attempt to secure finances as well, but policies and programs aimed at poor nonresidential fathers are usually punitive in nature and force mothers to identify fathers in order to qualify for welfare assistance ([Edelman, Holzer, & Offner, 2006](#)). Consequently, children and their mothers see little money from child support, as poor fathers are unmotivated to divert scarce resources to reimburse state outlays of welfare benefits ([Johnson, Levine, & Doolittle, 1999](#)). Recent tax initiatives in New York, in which nonresidential fathers can receive earned income tax credits for their children, may motivate some fathers to contribute financial support ([Kaufman, 2005](#)). However, social policy has failed to offer job training and placement services by which recruited fathers can support both mothers and their children. In effect, formal programs and policies may divert or even harm mothers' informal strategies to secure consistent and supportive fathers.

As this analysis indicates, mothers cannot secure support simply through identification and recruitment of biological fathers. For example, with the increasingly common experience of incarceration of both biological fathers and intimate partners, mothers must consider a wider array of men to contribute supports for children. However, policies and related program services are typically driven by guidelines to identify only biological fathers. Program staff who work with low-income mothers should note the array of fathers and father figures who are active in children's lives and who can provide them with material and social support. Paternal involvement in low-income families also requires a disproportional investment of kinwork from mothers. As the study shows, mothers who pursue resources for daily subsistence must package together the social support of a variety of fathers, just as they package together different kinds of material resources ([Edin & Lein, 1997](#)).

Mothers in this study indicated that contributions of guidance, time, and attention became vital sources of social support for children's development. However, these contributions did not translate as dollars, and few programs since 1990 have recognized and encouraged alternatives to financial provision, such as in-kind contributions ([Pirog-Good, 1993](#)). The study suggests that a sense of belonging through family and family-like relationships drives some aspects of mothers' recruitment of fathers. It also suggests that families expect different commitments from different men, and that involvement of nonbiological fathers is significant. Although nonbiological fathers may not compensate for financial support of biological fathers ([McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994](#)), they may compensate for other aspects of paternal involvement, such as caregiving. We need to explore systematically the contexts in which compensation may occur, and how to promote such compensation, to maximize resources and supports for children and their families.

Finally, social policy should acknowledge that care responsibilities, particularly in low-income and minority families, extend beyond the relationship of biological parents to obligate both maternal and paternal kin. Current policy initiatives encourage paternal involvement through funding for marriage promotion among low-income couples. Although marriage is one option to secure men's support, it focuses exclusively on partnering processes. In contrast, this study finds that paternal involvement also calls for a child-centered parenting process embedded in extended kin systems. In many families, the interdependence of extended family members' kinwork can be at odds with policy goals of locating biological fathers or enforcing work requirements for low-income mothers under welfare reform. Often, program eligibility is defined by one's status as mother or biological father, and involved kin are not considered for services. Stabilization and strengthening of adults' lives through good jobs, child care, health care, and housing will cultivate more parental figures to support children in low-income families.

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