

Capabilities and Contributions of Unwed Fathers

Robert I. Lerman

Summary

Young, minority, and poorly educated fathers in fragile families have little capacity to support their children financially and are hard-pressed to maintain stability in raising those children. In this article, Robert Lerman examines the capabilities and contributions of unwed fathers, how their capabilities and contributions fall short of those of married fathers, how those capabilities and contributions differ by the kind of relationship the fathers have with their child's mother, and how they change as infants grow into toddlers and kindergartners.

Unwed fathers' employment and earnings vary widely among groups but generally rise over time. At the child's birth, cohabiting fathers earn nearly 20 percent more than noncohabiting unwed fathers, and the gap widens over time. Still, five years after an unwed birth, the typical unwed father is working full time for the full year. Although most unwed fathers spend considerable time with their children in the years soon after birth, explains Lerman, over time their involvement erodes. Men who lose touch with their children are likely to see their earnings stagnate, provide less financial support, and often face new obligations when they father children with another partner. By contrast, the unwed fathers who marry or cohabit with their child's mother earn considerably higher wages and work substantially more than unwed fathers who do not marry or cohabit. These results suggest that unwed fathers' earnings are affected by family relationships as well as their education and work experience.

Lerman notes that several factors influence the extent to which unwed fathers stay involved with their children. Better-educated fathers, those who most identify with the father's role, and those with good relationships with the child's mother, are most likely to sustain a relationship with their children. Some studies even find that strong child support enforcement increases father involvement. For many years, policy makers approached the problem of noncustodial, unwed fathers on a single track—by trying to increase their child support payments. Today's policy makers are recognizing the limits of that strategy. New programs focus on improving the relationship and communication skills of unwed fathers. In addition, targeted training programs, such as apprenticeships, enable unwed fathers to earn a salary while they learn skills.

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Unwed fathers are a heterogeneous and evolving group. Many become fathers when they are quite young and have little ability to support a family above the poverty threshold. About half begin their experience as a father living with their child and cohabiting with the child's mother. Although the rest do not live with their newborn child, most have a romantic relationship with their child's mother and are closely involved with the infant. Over time, however, the fathers' involvement with their children erodes; when the children reach age five, only about 36 percent of fathers live with their child and of those who live apart, half have not visited the child within the previous month.¹

The majority of unwed fathers are men with a modest or poor education. Only about 12 percent have an associate's or bachelor's degree, a rate far below the 35 to 40 percent figure among all men. Only about one in four earns more than \$25,000 a year. Young unwed fathers have extremely low earnings, and many survive economically by living with parents or other family members. They pay little in child support, but they do spend considerable time with their children in the years soon after birth. As their earnings increase, their financial support increases as well, but connections with their children often fray. Men who lose touch with their children often experience additional problems. They are likely to see their earnings stagnate, they are less likely to provide financial support, and they often find themselves with new obligations when they father children with another partner. Even when unwed fathers pay child support, their contributions—in cash and time—to their child's well-being are far less than they would be if they were resident fathers.

By contrast, the unwed fathers who marry or move in with their child's mother follow a more positive path. They earn considerably higher wages and work substantially more than unwed fathers who do not marry or cohabit. Among noncustodial fathers aged twenty-five to thirty-nine, married high school dropouts earn about \$2,700 more than unwed high school graduates (with no college) and \$16,000 more than unwed high school dropouts.² Although many unwed fathers marry or cohabit with their child's mother at least temporarily, most do not. The tendency of unwed fathers to increase their earnings substantially when they marry or cohabit indicates that many are not realizing their full earnings potential. Another possibility is that an unrelated improvement in their labor market situation made these fathers more successful in the marriage market.

The better educated the unwed father, the higher his earnings and the more rapidly his earnings grow; high school graduates earn 25 to 33 percent more than dropouts.³ In the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study sample of men who became fathers in the late 1990s, more than one-third of unwed fathers had not completed high school. In that sample, dropping out of school was closely associated with having been incarcerated; 45 percent of fathers who had been in prison previously had not earned a high school degree. Thus, a significant share of fathers faced two critical barriers to attaining adequate earnings—both poor education and a history of imprisonment. In a national sample of unwed fathers drawn from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), nearly 25 percent lacked a high school diploma. In both the Fragile Families and SIPP samples, although few unwed fathers earned an associate's or bachelor's degree, those who did so achieved solid levels of earnings.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given their modest resources and increasing disengagement from their children and their children's mothers, one-half to two-thirds of unwed fathers provide little or no financial support to their children. Over the past fifteen years, the child support system has made great strides in establishing paternity among this group, but it has been less successful in increasing total support payments, both formal and informal. The system may, however, be imposing impossible arrearage burdens, especially on incarcerated men, and its increasingly rigorous efforts to enforce support may have contributed to declining employment among black men.

Cumulatively, these findings about unwed fathers represent a serious national problem. With annual nonmarital births reaching 1.7 million—and nearly 40 percent of all births—unwed fathers will bear at least partial responsibility for raising a major segment of the coming generation.⁴ The young, minority, and less educated parents who are having a large share of these births have little capacity to support their children financially and lack stability in raising them.

In this article, I examine the capabilities and contributions of fathers who are unmarried when their children are born. I focus first on their capabilities and economic circumstances. How do their capabilities differ from those of married fathers? How do their capabilities differ by the kind of relationship they have with their child's mother? How do their capabilities and earnings change as their infants grow into toddlers and kindergartners? Next, I look at the contributions of unwed fathers. How much financial and other support do they provide around the time the child is born, and how do those contributions change over time? Again, how does their

relationship with the child's mother affect their contributions? Finally, I examine the relationship between their capabilities and their contributions. How do weak capabilities and other constraints limit these fathers' contributions to their children? What role do poor education and earnings potential, previous incarceration, and responsibilities for other children, respectively, play in curtailing their contributions?

Policy makers can draw on several tools to help unwed fathers and their families improve their living standards and possibly their relationships as well. The most promising approaches involve training in a work-based context linked to careers. Sectoral strategies that involve close linkages between industries and workforce agencies have proved successful in raising the earnings of less-skilled men. Expanding apprenticeship training is an especially attractive option for unwed fathers since they can earn a salary while they undergo training that ultimately yields a valuable credential. Another approach, training in couple-relationship skills, could strengthen marriage and cohabiting relationships, which in turn could increase earnings. In addition, some of the skills learned to improve couple relationships, such as communication and problem solving, are applicable to many jobs. Couple-relationship skills training could thus raise fathers' earnings and ultimately the living standards of their children.

Earnings Capabilities of Unwed Fathers

Unwed fathers' earnings capabilities and actual earnings should be central concerns of policy makers committed to raising the living standards of children, especially children at risk of poverty. Raising the earnings of unwed fathers is likely to improve the living standards of children, not only by enabling these fathers to make formal and informal child

support payments but also, potentially, by increasing the likelihood that unwed fathers will marry their child's mother or live with her and their children.

Marriage and Child Poverty

Men generally can help their children either by providing adequate child support as a nonresident father or by supporting them directly as a married or cohabiting father. Although child support can help families avoid poverty and hardship, the marriage option is most favorable for children for at least three reasons. First, married fathers are more likely than unmarried fathers to help parent their children and increase their chances of long-run success. Second, married fathers are more likely to provide a stable source of income. And, third, marriage is associated with higher earnings and may induce men to maximize their earnings capabilities, again benefiting the entire family.⁵

The role of marriage in easing child poverty has been addressed by two studies that examine how trends in child poverty over the past half-century would have differed had parents continued to marry at rates prevalent during the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ Both studies, which took account of the incomes of the current pool of unmarried men and their likely spouses, found that the income pooling from the added marriages would have significantly reduced child poverty, even without the boost to men's earnings commonly associated with marriage.

Earnings Capacities and Earnings Levels of Unwed Fathers

Several sources of data offer evidence on unmarried fathers' earnings capabilities. One, the primary source in this review, is the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

(FFCWS), which offers data on parents of children born in urban hospitals in twenty large cities between 1998 and 2000.⁷ A second is the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (especially the 1979 panel, NLSY79), which now provides data from 1979 to 2006 on the cohort of individuals aged fourteen to twenty-one in 1979.

One recent study using the FFCWS sample presents comprehensive data on the characteristics of unwed fathers at the time of the child's birth and on their earnings over time, making it possible to trace links between their characteristics and their earnings.⁸ About 85 percent of unwed fathers in the sample were minority, with 56 percent black and 29 percent Hispanic; 15 percent were immigrants. About 40 percent of the unwed fathers had not completed high school, 40 percent had a high school degree or equivalent, and about 20 percent had some postsecondary education. By contrast, married fathers in the sample were far less likely to be black (27 percent) or Hispanic (24 percent) and were far better educated: only 17 percent were dropouts and 30 percent were college graduates. Age differences were also notable. The average age at the time of their child's birth was thirty-two among married men, twenty-seven among unwed fathers. When the men became fathers for the first time, only 13 percent of married fathers were under age twenty, compared with about 25 percent of unmarried men.⁹ Not surprisingly, education and age turn out to be important factors in a father's earnings capabilities, as better educated and older men would be expected to have significantly higher earnings than their less educated and younger peers.

Several other factors were also potentially relevant to fathers' earnings capabilities. Less than half (42 percent) of unwed fathers lived

with both their parents at age fifteen, a figure well below the 69 percent figure for married men. Unwed fathers were also significantly more likely than married fathers to have mental health problems, to have used illicit drugs, and to have served time in jail or in prison or both.¹⁰

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Another characteristic of fathers that was linked with their labor market outcomes was whether they were married. The earnings of married men were more than double those of unmarried men at the time of the child's birth.¹¹ Earnings averaged \$33,572 among married fathers, compared with only \$15,465 among unmarried men (the figures are in 2005 dollars). Hourly wage rates of unmarried men were only 60 percent of the rates of married men, though unmarried men worked only about 20 percent fewer hours each year.

Other tabulations for this sample indicate that the earnings of unwed fathers also vary by whether they cohabit with the mothers of their children. The annual earnings of

married, cohabiting, and noncohabiting men whose age and education were comparable at the time of the child's birth vary considerably. Among whites and blacks, married fathers earned 51 percent more than noncohabiting unwed fathers; cohabiting unwed fathers earned 19 percent more than noncohabiting fathers. Among Hispanics, married men earned only 19 percent more than noncohabiting unwed fathers; the difference between cohabiting and noncohabiting unwed fathers was essentially zero.

By the child's first birthday, fathers who were married at baseline had increased their earnings by 15 percent, to \$39,047; unmarried fathers had achieved an even more rapid 22 percent gain, to \$19,219. Two years later, initially married fathers were earning nearly \$47,000, a stunning 33 percent increase from their earnings at the child's birth. Unmarried fathers moved up as well but at a somewhat slower rate. Still, their earnings rose an impressive 30 percent over three years.¹² The earnings gains for initially married men took place entirely through hourly wage gains (from \$15.85 to \$20.68 over three years); most of the earnings growth for unmarried men also involved growth in wages (from \$9.64 to \$11.21), but some resulted from a 7 percent increase in hours worked over the year. Although unwed fathers worked about 20 percent fewer hours than married fathers in the year of their child's birth, they still averaged 1,823 hours a year, implying almost forty-six weeks of full-time work. By the fifth-year follow-up, men who were initially unmarried were working the equivalent of fifty weeks at forty hours a week. Thus, on average, unwed fathers quickly become full-time, year-round workers. A sizable share of unwed fathers, however, works much less than average.

One important fact relevant to fatherhood, employment levels, and employment growth is that 40 percent of unwed, nonresident fathers are teen fathers, compared with only about 16 percent of cohabiting fathers and 0.1 percent of married fathers. The weak job market outcomes of teen fathers—virtually none of whom are married—means that a large segment of unwed, nonresident fathers starts far behind other groups of fathers, but their earnings rise rapidly as they age into their twenties.

The link between men's earnings and their relationship status suggests that earnings capability and actual earnings may not always be the same. Fathers who work fewer hours, work at less demanding jobs, engage in less intensive job search, or work less hard at keeping a job may not realize their full earnings capability.

To examine whether the earnings of unwed fathers fall short of capacity, we compare their actual earnings to an estimate of what the earnings of unwed fathers would be if their education, work experience, and race or ethnicity matched those of married fathers. The outcomes from undertaking this exercise for fathers at baseline in the FFCWS indicate that differences in education, work experience, and race and ethnicity between married and unwed fathers accounted for only about half of the earnings gap.¹³ Although cohabiting fathers earned more than noncohabiting fathers, the two groups were similar in terms of the proportion of their earnings shortfall (relative to married fathers) that was associated with education, work experience, and race or ethnicity. Of the earnings difference between cohabiting and noncohabiting unwed fathers, only about one-third was associated with education, work experience, and race or ethnicity. Because these estimates account

for only some of the job market advantages that men who are married would have even if they were not married, they may overstate the gap between actual earnings and the earnings capabilities of unwed fathers. On the other hand, the estimates may understate the gap because wage rate differences may affect differences in effort.

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The concentration on average earnings masks wide variations in earnings among unwed fathers. In general, the earnings of noncohabiting fathers varied more widely than those of cohabiting men. Because the earnings gains for unwed noncustodial fathers were also uneven, with smaller gains for fathers at the 25th percentile, their earnings fell further behind those at the 75th percentile as time went by. By the child's fifth birthday, the average annual hours worked by unwed fathers were equivalent to fifty-two weeks at forty hours, or 2,080 hours. But at the 25th percentile, fathers not initially cohabiting worked only about 1,350 hours a year, while married fathers worked 2,080 hours, and initially cohabiting fathers worked 1,768 hours, or about halfway between the married and noncohabiting unwed fathers. The lower hours worked among unwed fathers could indicate that a significant share of fathers do not utilize their capacity or that they cannot

find jobs because of shortfall in demand in their segment of the job market.

Earnings shortfalls at the bottom end of the distribution are particularly noticeable. At the child's fifth birthday, unwed fathers at the 25th percentile reported earning only \$5,000 a year. Even among cohabiting fathers, those at the 25th percentile earned only \$8,000.

Estimates based only on earnings in the formal sector of the economy understate the total earnings of unwed fathers.¹⁴ A study based on the FFCWS examined formal and informal earnings one year after the child's birth and divided unwed fathers into cohabiting and noncohabiting fathers. Cohabiting fathers averaged about \$24,500 a year in formal-sector earnings and another \$1,700 in informal earnings. Other unwed fathers had similar formal earnings and nearly \$3,000 in informal earnings.

Unwed Fathers and Other Groups of Young Men

The adults in the FFCWS are all parents. Other studies reveal how the capabilities of unwed fathers stack up against men with no children. In an early study using data from the NLSY79, I found that men who became unwed fathers during the 1980s had more educational and social shortcomings than did their childless peers.¹⁵ The shortcomings were especially striking among white young men. For example, nearly 50 percent of white eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds (as of 1979) who became unwed fathers by 1984 were high school dropouts, a rate far higher than the 10 percent of whites who had no children. Nearly one-third of white men who became unwed fathers by 1988 had been charged in an adult court as of 1982, compared with 5 percent of childless white young men. Black and Hispanic young men who became unwed

fathers also performed more poorly in school and were more involved in drug and criminal activity than their counterparts who did not have children or who married. However, the differentials between unwed fathers and other young men were not as large for minorities as for whites.

The gaps in earnings and hours worked between unwed fathers and other groups of young men also varied by race and ethnicity. Black, white, and Hispanic unwed fathers all earned substantially less than married fathers but also far less than single men with no children. However, the size of the differences was much larger among white and Hispanic than among black young men.

When isolating the role of unwed father status from an extensive list of other factors associated with low earnings, I estimated that unwed fathers earned about \$1,200 less a year than married, nonresident fathers and \$3,800–\$4,500 less than married resident men and married men with no children. As in the findings cited above from the FFCWS, unwed fatherhood was associated with earnings below what would be predicted on the basis of human capital characteristics. Again, the evidence indicates that although unwed fathers have lower education and experience than do other fathers, their actual earnings fall short of their earnings capabilities.

Child Support Effects on Unwed Fathers' Earnings

The earnings of unwed fathers not living with their children might be affected by child support obligations in several ways. If, for example, a nonresident father earns an additional \$500 a month, his child support might increase by about \$125. Together with higher taxes on the higher income, the increased child support orders could lower fathers'

returns to earnings, perhaps causing them to reduce their work effort. A second possibility is that child support payments could make the father poorer and thus stimulate more work effort. A third possibility is that rigorous enforcement by the child support system could cause fathers to shift from the formal to the informal, or underground, work sector, where earnings are more difficult for the government to track.

The evidence on how child support enforcement affects earnings is quite mixed.

Marianne Bitler finds that the earnings of noncustodial fathers increase as child support enforcement becomes stricter.¹⁶ By contrast, Harry Holzer, Paul Offner, and Elaine Sorensen find that increasingly vigorous child support enforcement has contributed to the decline in employment of black men, especially men in their late twenties and early thirties, many of whom are unwed fathers.¹⁷ Although Maureen Waller and Robert Plotnick report evidence from qualitative studies that rigorous child support enforcement induces men to shift from formal to informal labor markets,¹⁸ Lauren Rich, Irwin Garfinkel, and Qin Gao, using the Fragile Families data, do not find substitution of this type.¹⁹ In fact, they find that stronger child support enforcement reduces the informal working hours of fathers with earnings in both sectors.

Incarceration Effects on Unwed Fathers' Earnings

Another study drawn from the Fragile Families panel explores the effect of previous incarceration on the capabilities of unwed fathers.²⁰ The study finds that fathers who had never been incarcerated had \$26,700 in total (regular plus underground) earnings, compared with \$19,216 in total earnings for those who had previously been incarcerated. The study shows that having been incarcerated

reduces the likelihood of employment, the number of weeks worked, and earnings, even net of education, race, drug and alcohol problems, depression, and poor health. The effects are quite large, nearly a 30 percent reduction in regular earnings, some of which is offset by earnings increases in underground employment. Prior incarceration may itself lower earnings or it may be a proxy for other characteristics, such as a poor work ethic and weak basic reading and math skills, that lower prospective earnings. Another possibility is that men who become incarcerated make other bad choices, including choices about how hard to work and what jobs to pursue.

Other research reports similar findings regarding the effects of prior incarceration on the capabilities and contributions of unwed fathers. At the time of the nonmarital birth, 42 percent of the Fragile Families sample of unwed fathers had spent time in jail. As Amanda Geller, Garfinkel, and Bruce Western point out, only 65 percent of these men were employed, and their average wage rate was only \$8.50 an hour, well below the wage of men who had never been incarcerated.²¹ By the five-year follow-up, a substantial majority of unwed, nonresident fathers had incarceration records, significantly reducing their earnings capabilities.

Marriage and Cohabitation Transitions

The earnings patterns of men in fragile families in part reflect the dynamics of their family circumstances. At the birth of nonmarital children, 82 percent of the couples in the Fragile Families panel were either cohabiting or in a close romantic relationship. Five years later, 15 percent were married and 21 percent were cohabiting or in a close romantic relationship. How did the marriage and cohabitation transitions affect men's job market outcomes? In a study of first-time fathers, Christine Percheski

and Christopher Wildeman examine trajectories over time of weeks worked and hours worked per week.²² They find that married fathers initially work several more weeks and longer hours than unwed, cohabiting fathers or unwed, noncohabiting fathers, but that the gaps in weeks worked and in hours worked per week narrow over the five-year period after the child's birth. Moreover, married fathers' initial advantage in weeks worked largely disappears when the fathers compared are similar in such characteristics as age, education, immigrant status, teenage fatherhood, health, criminal record, drug use, race, and Hispanic origin.

The study examines transitions both out of and into marriage and cohabitation. Married fathers and cohabiting fathers who separate from their children's mothers show declines in employment. Unwed fathers who marry and become resident fathers experience increases in weeks worked and hours worked. Overall, the study suggests, resident fatherhood itself stimulates unmarried men to work significantly more weeks and hours.

Additional evidence on the impacts of marriage and cohabitation transitions on labor market outcomes comes from two other studies of the FFCWS sample.²³ Garfinkel and others find that entering marriage between the birth of the child and one year later was associated with an earnings gain of 29 percent at the one-year point, 44 percent after three years, and 66 percent after five years. Entering cohabitation raised earnings almost as much. In all cases the increases are net of age, education, race, immigrant status, and prior relationship stability. Using a different methodology and focusing on race differences in responses, Ronald Mincy, Jennifer Hill, and Marilyn Sinkewicz show estimates indicating no statistically significant earnings gains from

the transition to marriage. They argue that alternative approaches do not account sufficiently for differences between the characteristics of unwed fathers who subsequently marry and those who do not. Still, even their estimates indicate marriage-induced earnings gains of 40–50 percent for black unwed fathers. These gains are not so precisely estimated to yield statistical significance at the stringent 5 percent standard, but would be significant at the 10 percent level.

The studies by Percheski and Wildeman, by Garfinkel and his colleagues, and by Mincy, Hill, and Sinkewicz yield somewhat different conclusions about the persistence of a labor market disadvantage associated with unwed fatherhood. From the perspective of Percheski and Wildeman, the initial disadvantage linked to unwed fatherhood itself largely dissipates, at least with respect to weeks worked and hours worked. Yet some of the convergence results from the transition that some unwed, nonresident fathers make to become resident fathers. The picture painted by Garfinkel and his colleagues is more consistent with an enduring and substantial negative impact of unwed fatherhood on job market outcomes. Mincy, Hill, and Sinkewicz point to variations in earnings growth, mainly owing to differences in the initial characteristics of unwed fathers. Only black unwed fathers show consistent gains from marriage. Some differences in study methods may account for differences in results. The Garfinkel analysis uses data from all fathers, not just first-time fathers, and its sample of 4,897 fathers is more than four times the 1,086 fathers in the Percheski-Wildeman study. The Mincy, Hill, and Sinkewicz study focuses on race and ethnic differences and marriage transitions only up to three years after the child's birth, while Garfinkel and others use pooled estimates that account for marriage

transitions up to five years after the child's birth. Also, while Percheski and Wildeman include teenage fatherhood as an independent variable, Garfinkel and his colleagues control only for age in a way that assumes changes in age have the same effect whether the starting point is eighteen or twenty-five.

An earlier study relevant to the issue of relationship transitions tracked the earnings and hours worked of unwed fathers aged twenty to twenty-seven in 1984 by their marital status in 1988.²⁴ In general, these unwed fathers experienced substantial increases in hours worked and earnings, regardless of their marital status in 1988. The nearly 70 percent of fathers who remained unmarried raised their annual hours of work from 1,078 to 1,428 and nearly doubled their earnings, from about \$5,500 in 1983 to about \$10,500 in 1987. The 22 percent of unwed fathers who married between 1984 and 1988, however, raised their annual earnings even more, from \$7,370 to \$17,699. The rapid economic growth from the mid-1980s to the late 1980s no doubt amplified the employment and earnings opportunities young men experienced as they matured and obtained adult jobs.

Contributions of Unwed Fathers

Two important—and measurable—ways in which fathers support their families are by contributing time and money. Although the quality of fathers' parenting and their relationships with children and partners are also no doubt critical contributions, they are difficult to measure. The increased emphasis by federal and state policy makers since the mid-1970s on using child support to help children escape poverty and on having fathers reimburse government welfare programs for supporting their children has led to many studies of child support payments. Studies of visitation and of time spent by fathers with

their children followed shortly afterward. The less quantifiable contributions of fathers are now attracting some attention.²⁵

Unwed Fathers' Monetary Contributions

National census data shed light on contributions by fathers who are not married at the time of the survey, while long-term data from the FFCWS and NLSY capture the contributions of all men who father children outside marriage, including men who subsequently cohabit and marry. Thus, the two types of information involve somewhat different groups of fathers.

The standard national estimates of the monetary contributions of fathers come from representative samples of custodial mothers and their children. Although many of these fathers were married at the time of the child's birth, others were and are still unmarried. In April 2008, the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) obtained reports by custodial parents (usually custodial mothers) about the contributions of the noncustodial parents (usually fathers) of their children.²⁶ Although more than 60 percent of divorced custodial mothers had a formal agreement concerning child support payments, 56 percent of the 3.8 million unwed custodial mothers had no formal agreement. Of the 1.4 million unwed mothers with an award and a payment due in 2007, 558,000 received their full payment and 478,000 received a partial payment. The average payments received by never-married mothers amounted to about \$250 a month (\$3,040 a year). In addition, about 15 percent of unwed fathers included nonresident children in their health insurance coverage. Further, some of these custodial parents (about 8 percent) received child support payments even though they reported none was due through a child support agreement.²⁷ Others received noncash support.

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Another census survey, the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), asked noncustodial fathers about all payments for the "...support of your child or children under 21 years of age who live outside of this household..." About 900,000 unwed fathers reported providing support, with the median amount paid about \$3,100 a year.²⁸ This figure is broadly consistent with the \$3,040 mean annual amount reported in the CPS by never-married mothers, although the CPS figure includes only formal child support.

The child support provided by unwed fathers in the FFCWS was quite modest as well. Although legal paternity was established for 87 percent of children of cohabiting fathers, paternity was established for only 56 percent of children born to nonresident fathers. Support orders were much less frequently established, initially only for 20 percent of unwed, noncohabiting fathers and 6 percent of cohabiting fathers.²⁹ Lenna Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel provide a detailed look at the unwed fathers' contributions using data from interviews with 1,326 unwed mothers who

were not cohabiting with the father of a child born three years earlier.³⁰ Only 24 percent of the mothers reported receiving any formal support, but another 29 percent received some informal cash support. Although these figures are somewhat lower than reported in the CPS for a broader group of unwed mothers, they reinforce the importance of informal payments by many fathers. Fathers who have once lived with their children provide more informal cash support. Perhaps such men feel more closely linked to their children than do fathers who have never cohabited. In this sample, informal support often substitutes for formal support: mothers without a formal support order receive much more informal cash support than do mothers with an order. Indeed, mothers with no formal support order received almost \$150 a month in informal support.

Unwed Fathers' Time Spent with Children

The usual metric for judging the involvement of nonresidential fathers with their children is the time they spend together. But, as Sandra Hofferth, Nicole Forry, and Elizabeth Peters point out, contact may not be the appropriate measure because studies find little or no effect of fathers' time on child well-being.³¹ Positive and authoritative parenting may be more consequential than simple time spent together for better child outcomes. Of course, fathers will rarely be able to exert positive and authoritative parenting without spending time with their children.

Data on the time men spend with their children are available from mothers' reports on contact with fathers.³² Some 3.7 million unwed mothers reported that roughly 40 percent of the men had no contact with their children during the previous year but most (2.2 million) fathers had some contact.³³ The amount of contact varied widely: the bottom quartile of fathers had 10 or fewer days of

contact for the year; the top quartile, 120 days or more. Although men with more contact were more likely to provide support, the difference was modest. Those not paying formal support averaged about 48 days of contact, compared with 61 days among men who did pay support. In addition to visiting with their children, many fathers pay informal support. Unwed, custodial mothers reported that about half of fathers who paid no formal support made informal contributions, with one-third paying for clothing and about one-fourth paying for food.

Information from fathers is available for a representative sample of 470,000 nonresident fathers who report child support payments (out of the more than 2 million unwed, nonresident fathers in the SIPP panel). This group reported spending an average of fifty days a year with children living elsewhere—a figure similar to the median reported by unwed mothers as visiting.

One study uses mothers' reports of nonresident father involvement with a representative sample of children in 1997.³⁴ Of those fathers, 34 percent had no contact with the child's household at all, and 49 percent had no influence on decision making. Only 19 percent had a great deal of influence on issues involving their children. About 46 percent played with their children at least once a month, but only 15 percent spent time with them in school activities.

How Father Involvement Evolves

How does the involvement of unwed fathers change over time? In an analysis following young (nineteen- to twenty-six-year-old) fathers for eight years between 1984 and 1992, Elaine Sorensen and I found that most unwed fathers remained involved with at least one of their children.³⁵ Of men who

had become unwed fathers by 1984, nearly half were living with at least one child in 1992. Moreover, as of 1992, only one in four reported either not visiting at all or visiting less than once a month. When the focus is on men's first nonmarital birth, however, involvement does erode. In the initial year, about 19 percent of fathers visited less than once a month or not at all; six years later, the proportion had jumped to 35 percent. Although overall involvement declined, increases in father involvement were associated with gains in fathers' earnings.

Studies based on father involvement for the Fragile Families sample have so far been able to examine only the first five years after the nonmarital births. Over this period, the involvement of unwed fathers with their children has eroded in two ways. First, the share of unwed fathers living with their children declined from 52 percent at one year after the child's birth to 44 percent after three years and to 37 percent after five years. Second, unwed fathers not living with their children reduced their visitation and child contacts over time. During thirty days before an interview at the one-year point, 62 percent of unwed fathers had been in contact with their child, but the share fell to 56 percent at the three-year follow-up.³⁶ Put another way, 44 percent of unwed fathers had no contact with their children in the previous month. This pattern is similar to that for young unwed fathers in the NLSY.³⁷

Father involvement continues to erode as children age from three to five. Forty-seven percent of unwed fathers saw their three-year-olds more than once a month, compared with 43 percent by the time the child reached age five.³⁸ At that point, 49 percent of fathers had not seen their children in the previous month, and 37 percent had had no contact with the

child in the previous two years. Forty-three percent of fathers, however, still had regular enough contact to see their five-year-olds an average of twelve days a month.

Most unwed fathers (64 percent) remained in contact with their children at least through the age of five; 37 percent lived with their children, and another 27 percent visited more than once a month. But the share of children not seeing their father more than once a month rose from 18 percent at age one to 36 percent at age five. One may view this glass as being half full (after all, most unwed fathers do not abandon their children), but it is worrying that by age five more than one-third of children born outside marriage have minimal or no involvement with their fathers. Moreover, father-child contacts are likely to erode further as children move through elementary and high school.

Factors Influencing Father Involvement

Several factors influence the extent to which unwed fathers stay involved with their children. A variety of studies find that better educated fathers and those who most identify with the father's role are more likely to sustain a relationship with their children. Not surprisingly, so too are fathers with good relationships with their child's mother. At the same time, fathers who subsequently have children with other partners are likely to reduce their contact with previous children.³⁹

Black fathers are more likely than white and Hispanic fathers to maintain close contact with their children, especially in cases when the father neither marries nor cohabits with the mother. Mincy and Hillard Pouncy find, in a study of low-income families in Louisiana, that many black fathers retain their involvement with their child, despite having only intermittent or no romantic relationships

with the child's mother.⁴⁰ Other studies indicate that black fathers and mothers maintain better relationships after separation and, in turn, have improved relationships with their children.⁴¹ Although divorced fathers are generally more likely than unwed fathers to pay child support and to have frequent contact with their children, black unwed fathers have greater contact with their children than black divorced fathers.⁴² One possible explanation is that black mothers and nonresident fathers live closer to each other than other unwed parents.

Quantitative as well as qualitative studies based on the FFCWS reinforce earlier findings and document other factors affecting fathers' involvement.⁴³ Unwed fathers who participated at the time of the birth in parenting and providing financial support were more likely to remain involved with their children. Problematic behaviors by the fathers, such as violence or drug or alcohol abuse, generally led to less involvement, largely because of mothers' efforts to protect their children. Not surprisingly, close relationships between unwed mothers and unwed fathers led to greater father involvement. The quality of the parental relationship is measured not only in terms of whether they are cohabiting or in a close romantic relationship at the time of birth, but also in terms of how well they communicate, support each other, and get along. The linkages between relationship quality and father involvement remain even after the parents are no longer romantically involved.

On the basis of in-depth and repeated interviews with a subset of the FFCWS sample, Waller finds that some unwed fathers were closely enough involved to become the primary caregiver or to share equally in the care of young children.⁴⁴ The reasons varied. Some chose to do so because of experience

and strong preferences for fathering; others, because of problems that mothers were facing; still others, because they were out of work and could best contribute to the household by caring for their children. When their relationships with the mothers ended, some fathers ended their caregiver role. But others began doing more with their children, especially when they had good jobs or were responding to the mother's loss of a job, substance abuse, or other problems. Because research on these patterns comes mainly from ethnographic studies, it is not clear how many low-income fathers are highly active caregivers and what the potential is for expanding the share of fathers taking on these responsibilities.

When the parents separate, some men and women start new dating and cohabiting relationships and have children with new partners. These changes can complicate fathers' involvement with their children, as a study by Laura Tach, Mincy, and Kathryn Edin reveals.⁴⁵ The authors find that new relationships and child-bearing by mothers lowers the number of days fathers see their children by more than one-third; smaller reductions in involvement also take place as a result of fathers' new partnerships. Other factors lowering father involvement include the amount of time elapsed since the parents lived together, fathers' drug use and recent time in jail or prison, and joblessness or low earnings of fathers.

How the Child Support System Affects Fathers' Financial and Time Contributions

Much of the detailed research on unwed fathers' contributions to their children has focused on the impact of the child support enforcement system and on the interactions between child support and welfare assistance. Other studies focus on the effect of incarceration, the links between support payments and

contact with children, and the involvement of more than one custodial parent.

Several studies have analyzed the relationship between fathers' contributions through visitation and child support payments. Fathers induced to pay support may take an increasing interest in how their child is reared and do more to involve themselves in the lives of their children. Mothers may also be more receptive to the involvement of fathers who are contributing financial support to their children. Another possibility is that involved fathers are more willing to provide financial support. Yet another is that fathers may see financial support as substituting for contributions of their time.

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Empirical studies yield mixed findings on the child support–visitation linkage for all noncustodial parents. Some find that strong child support enforcement influences both support payments and father involvement. Using state differences in enforcement to help identify potential effects, Chien-Chung Huang finds that more rigorous child support enforcement raises child support payments and increases visitation.⁴⁶ In fact, Huang estimates that 45 percent of the increase in visitation he finds is explained by the increased rigor of the child support enforcement system. In a study of unwed fathers one year after their children's

births, Mincy, Garfinkel, and Nepomnyaschy found, using Fragile Families data, that strong enforcement, measured as a city or state's commitment to establishing paternity, increased the chance that fathers had seen their child in the past thirty days and that they had received an overnight visit from their child in the past year.⁴⁷ A nuanced set of findings emerges from a separate study by Nepomnyaschy of the interactions between father involvement, and formal and informal support payments.⁴⁸ Both formal and informal support payments one year after a child's birth raise the likelihood of father contact two years later. But although early contact has no effect on later formal payments, father visits at year one do increase informal payments in year three.

These and other estimates showing that child support enforcement increases formal support payments generally do not take into account possible indirect effects on informal payments. Rigorous child support enforcement, for example, could mainly shift payments from informal to formal without increasing what mothers receive. In fact, the shift could even reduce mothers' receipts because the formal payments sometimes go to reimburse the government. In a striking finding based on the Fragile Families sample and child support enforcement variables at the city level, Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel find that strong enforcement raises formal child support payments but that the increase is fully offset by reductions in the amount of informal support.⁴⁹ It is not clear, however, how far this finding can be generalized. Child support enforcement may be increasing the support provided by the broader population of nonresident fathers. And the shift from informal to formal support may itself be a positive change in that it contributes to the integrity of the child support system. Nonetheless, the Nepomnyaschy-Garfinkel study

suggests that past studies may have overstated the gains from strong child support enforcement by failing to account carefully for informal payments.

Unwed Fathers' Earnings and Child Support Obligations

One primary purpose of research on the earnings of unwed fathers is to determine both the potential scope for increasing child support payments and the current burdens of child support on unwed fathers. In general, the approach is to develop accurate estimates of the incomes of fathers and what they should pay under sensible child support guidelines—as well as the gap between the two. With this approach comes the presumption that actual earnings represent earnings capabilities. My focus here is on unwed fathers not living with their children, because cohabiting fathers are providing direct support to the family budget.

Some studies call attention to how hard it is for many such fathers to make reasonable financial contributions. Only 10 percent of poor, young nonresident fathers paid support in 1990, for example, while half of those with incomes above the poverty level paid support.⁵⁰ Payments reported by fathers who had not graduated from high school were one-third less than payments by fathers with at least a high school diploma (U.S. census). Young fathers earn less and pay less than other fathers.

In a recent paper, Garfinkel and Marilyn Sinkewicz estimate the earnings relevant to the typical child owed child support from a nonresident father.⁵¹ Excluding fathers who have died, who have no knowledge of their fatherhood, or who are otherwise ineligible, the authors estimate that the mean annual earnings of unwed, nonresident fathers eligible to pay child support is about \$18,000

one year after the child's birth. In calculating potential child support, Garfinkel and Sinke-wicz include the obligations of unwed fathers to more than one mother. These additional obligations, along with improved earnings estimates, reduce the capability of unwed fathers to pay child support to current children from 60 to 33 percent. Obligations differ significantly by race. Although earnings differences between white and black unwed fathers are modest (\$19,324 vs. \$16,927), black fathers have an average of 1.2 children from a previous partner, as compared with 1.0 for whites.

Another study highlights the large number of children to whom unwed fathers must pay support out of their typically modest incomes. Using Wisconsin data on welfare recipients, Daniel Meyer, Maria Cancian, and Steven Cook find that only 26 percent of fathers have children with only one mother who has established connections only with that one father.⁵² Another 28 percent have children with only one mother who has connections with multiple fathers; 9 percent have children with two or more mothers who have connections with only that one father; and 37 percent have children with two or more mothers who have connections with multiple fathers. The study examines connections between mothers and fathers with legally established paternity. The authors find that fathers who have children with multiple mothers pay significantly greater support, mainly because they owe more. Controlling for total support owed, however, fathers who have children with multiple mothers pay less support.

Whatever their actual contributions, many unwed fathers face child support obligations that represent a very large share of their incomes. Those with children on welfare confront the additional disincentive of knowing

that much of their support payment reimburses the government instead of improving their child's standard of living.⁵³ In a study of all Wisconsin children on welfare, Cancian and Meyer reported that about 25 percent of all noncustodial fathers (most of whom were unwed) were ordered to pay more than 40 percent of their reported personal income in child support.⁵⁴ In 1999, one-third of fathers reported incomes below the poverty line. More than half the fathers were living with children other than the child on welfare. The authors estimated that if child support orders reflected Wisconsin standards (guidelines for the percent of income noncustodial parents should pay), the poverty rate among nonresident fathers would increase from 34 percent (before paying child support) to 39 percent (after paying child support).

Incarceration as a Barrier to Fathers' Contributions

Another critical barrier to fathers' contributions is incarceration, past and present. In 2007, about 750,000 inmates in state or federal prisons were fathers to 1.7 million children.⁵⁵ Few of these men can pay any support while in prison, but many face support obligations anyway. The time spent in prison thereby increases the arrearages that must be paid off when they leave. High arrearages, together with current obligations, mean that fathers will face such high deductions from any post-incarceration earnings that they will be discouraged from participating in the formal job market. Given their limited job skills, lack of recent work experience, and their criminal record, it is not surprising that fathers who have been in prison pay far less than other fathers. Five years after a nonmarital birth, the annual contribution of unwed fathers who had never been in prison averaged nearly \$2,700, about 2.7 times the \$964 average annual payment by unwed fathers who had been

imprisoned.⁵⁶ Net of other social and personal characteristics, previously incarcerated fathers are 36 percent less likely to make financial contributions to their children, and when they do, they contribute less than other nonresident fathers. Almost 80 percent of the effect of incarceration on financial contributions can be accounted for by two factors: performance in the labor market and relationship instability after incarceration. Previously incarcerated fathers are far more likely to remain nonresident fathers than to live with their children.

Implications for Research and Policy

Unwed mothers and fathers are now bearing 40 percent of the nation's children. Despite the severe problems presented by this new reality—especially high poverty and bleak outlooks for children—past efforts by policy makers to stem the tide have proved largely unsuccessful. Most policy interventions have targeted women. Some discourage teen pregnancy; others (such as an expanded earned income tax credit, child care subsidies, child health insurance, and work requirements) try to raise the work effort and incomes of single mothers.

The primary initiative focused on men has been to increase child support collections from noncustodial fathers. Steps such as improving the rate of paternity establishment, increasing both the number and size of child support awards, and reliably collecting amounts due have had two goals—to increase the incomes of single parents and their children and to discourage men from becoming unwed fathers or separating from the mother of their children. Although initiatives in the child support arena have achieved some income gains for single parents, they have proved less successful in lowering nonmarital births. Moreover, further tightening the child

support program is likely to yield diminishing returns. More rigorous child support enforcement seems to increase fathers' formal payments, but not the total amount paid. Strict enforcement of obligations—including the buildup of arrearages when fathers are in jail and unable to earn anything—can prove counterproductive, as men facing enormous debts relative to their incomes become discouraged and fail to earn up to their potential.

Reducing the financial disincentives to marry that are built into public tax and benefit programs is another potential option. But notwithstanding modest recent changes that lower marriage penalties, efforts to tilt benefits further toward two-parent families would either be prohibitively expensive in this era of enormous government deficits or would lower benefits to the poorest families, most of which are single-parent families.

Some research findings on unwed fathers point toward policies that involve few such difficult tradeoffs. One effort already under way consists of programs to improve the relationship and communication skills of unwed fathers and mothers and, in turn, increase the likelihood of marriage and marital stability. Nonexperimental evidence suggests that enhanced couple relationships, particularly marriage, will increase the earnings of fathers as they utilize more of their capabilities. Even if participating individuals ultimately separate, an improved relationship between parents is likely to increase fathers' contributions of money and time, thereby improving the capacity of parents to raise healthy children. Many low-income fathers already spend much time caring for their children. Improving parental relationships could enhance their parenting. Initial results from the Building Strong Families experiment, which provided group sessions on communication, conflict

resolution, intimacy, trust, and other relationship skills to unwed couples, show no significant increases for the full sample in terms of parents living together or relationship quality.⁵⁷ Modest, statistically significant improvements did occur in one site and for black couples. Moreover, these programs are still in their early stages and the actual hours of group sessions were small. As additional research and demonstration evidence accumulates, researchers will learn whether relationship skills training can play a constructive role in helping couples and children.

Central to improving family outcomes on a long-term basis is increasing the earnings capacities of unwed fathers, especially those with the least education. Although gains from training programs are uneven, especially among men, evidence shows substantial increases in earnings associated with years of general and vocational education. Sectoral strategies are emerging as a promising way to link training with employer demands and careers. These sectoral programs target an industry (or subset of an industry), become a strategic partner by learning about the industry's workforce policies, reach out to low-income job seekers, and work with other labor market groups, such as community colleges, community nonprofits, employer groups, and policy makers. Nonexperimental evidence indicates that six sectoral programs taking part in the Sectoral Employment Development Learning Project (SEDLP) yielded earnings gains of more than 70 percent for the participants employed for two years.⁵⁸

A traditional sector-based approach with a long track record of success in raising earnings through targeted training is the apprenticeship system. Apprenticeships involve intensive work-based learning and classroom courses. Employers are central to the process, setting

up the programs and paying the apprentices during their work-based learning. Apprenticeships are particularly well suited to many unwed fathers, who can earn a salary while they learn skills. The learning takes place mostly at workplaces in the context of real production, relieving apprentices from having to spend much time in classrooms. Completing an apprenticeship yields a respected, portable credential, a sense of pride, and participation in a community of occupational practice. Finally, empirical evidence shows that apprenticeships substantially raise the earnings of workers and result in high levels of satisfaction among employers.⁵⁹

Another broad option is to add employment components to current marriage education initiatives. One possibility is a joint couple-based employment program that allows both partners to understand what the other is undertaking. The concept showed promise as part of a job readiness and job search assistance program for seventeen- to twenty-four-year-old couples.⁶⁰

Helping young people get off to a solid start in careers can be important for improving couple outcomes and avoiding nonmarital births. Career Academies, for example, not only raised the earnings of young men, especially those with a high or medium risk of dropping out of high school, but also generated gains in marriage as well.⁶¹ Complementing the Career Academies with training in relationships skills might reinforce their pro-family outcomes. Adding relationship-skills components to other highly touted youth programs, including Job Corps, Youth-Build, and the National Guard ChalleNGe Academy, would be a low-cost way to recognize close linkages between careers and family dynamics.

Finally, child support programs should do more to recognize inequities and inefficiencies. It should be easier for fathers to adjust awards when they are the primary caregiver and when they are involuntarily unemployed. The data document a wide dispersion of earnings and household incomes of unwed fathers, with some fathers capable of making appropriate payments, some having obligations to multiple partners, others facing extremely

low earnings and incomes, and still others having low earnings but living in moderate-income households. A collection focus may be sensible for the high earners and for others with high earnings capabilities. But for low earners, partnering with responsible father programs and incorporating employment and relationship-skills programs show more promise in achieving child support and broader social objectives.

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